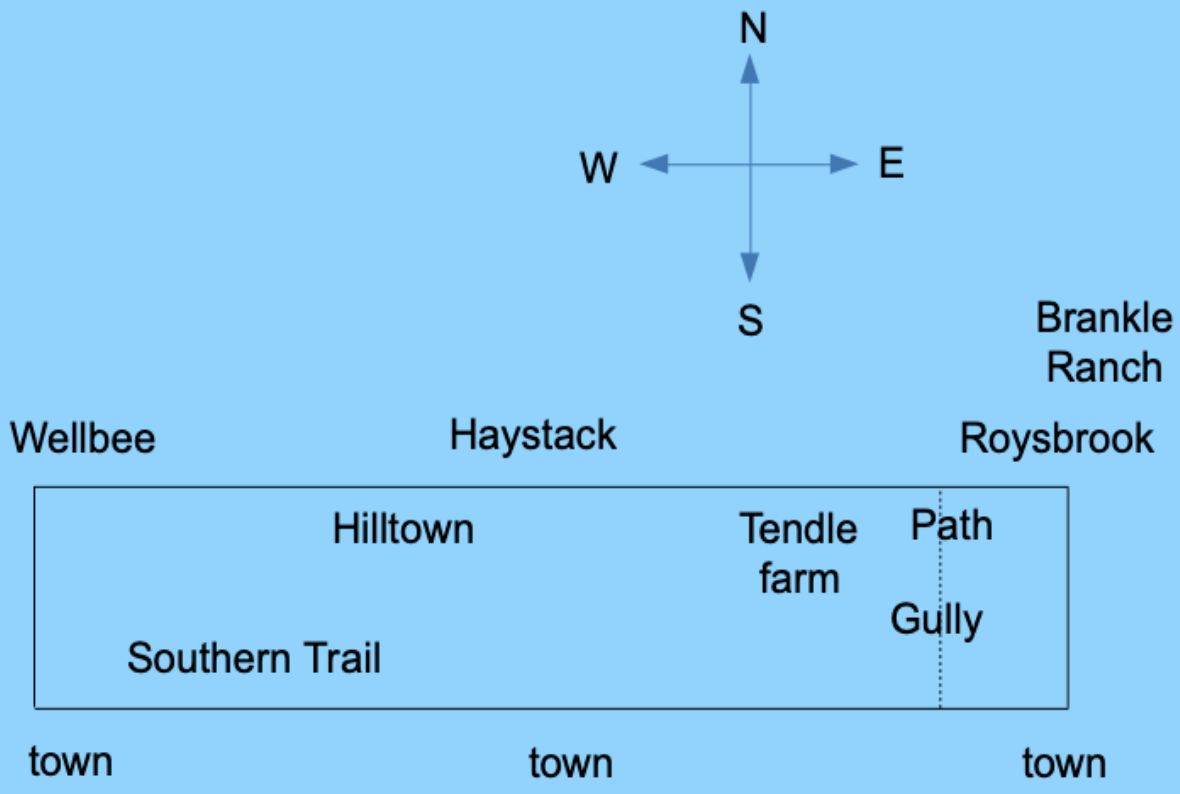
WE HEAR HE SHOOTS GOOD

In the Old West, Not All Heroes Were the Same



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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

So-called “AI” was not used at all in creating this work of fiction. That fact will be obvious to any reader who understands what digitally implemented algorithms coupled with data bases can and cannot do.

Roysbrook

Dan holstered his two six-shooters as if casually brushing off dust from the sides of his pants.

Nora Coren stood at her second floor bedroom window, both hands covering her mouth in the universal display of shock, with her unblinking eyes riveted on Dan.

Separating the two strangers was the one strip in the town of Roysbrook that could be referred to as a “road” — running straight and flat for the hundred yards from one end of town center to the other. It was a ten-yard-wide expanse of sand and pebbles adorned with horse manure in various stages of assimilation; courtesy of hooves, boots, and wagon wheels. Two boardwalks lined the road, abutting the front of their respective rows of opposing, wooden buildings.

A pair of bodies added to that adornment presently. Their former steeds, having briefly continued to gallop as their burdens fell off, stopped and looked back at those bodies. Seeing no movement, the two inconstant mounts trotted off together toward the nearby grazing patches lining the brook for which the town was named.

Dan leaned over to gather packages off the ground. Glancing up, he caught sight of a statue of Nora in the window directly across the road. They gazed at each other for a few seconds, devoid of any form of mutual communication. He turned to his wagon and placed the packages in the back. With his retrieved packages representing the culmination of his appointed rounds in town that day, Dan Tendle unlashed his two horses, climbed onto the wagon’s bench seat, and gently urged the mares westward en route to the Tendle farm.

Sheriff Coren emerged from the doorway directly under Nora's window, strapping on his gun belt as he hastened into the road but missing a couple of accouterments he deemed inessential given the exigency attendant to the sound of gunfire. The advent of the sheriff emboldened people to emerge, all gradually converging on the two corpses. The sheriff loudly subdued the babble of voices from the crowd and orchestrated a coherent accounting from a series of witnesses, eventually assembling a consensus in chronological order.

The sheriff learned the two dead men were newcomers who were playing cards in the saloon. Where else would newcomers go? They accused the town's card sharp of cheating. What else would a card sharp do? They stood up, each drew his six-shooter, and each put two bullets in the card sharp while he was still sitting at the table. The verdict was murder, as signified by the jury of nodding heads among the crowd.

The two strangers backed out of the saloon, menacingly waving their guns to discourage any heroics by onlookers. They mounted their horses and galloped westward, shooting randomly several times in the general direction of people they saw. Everyone panicked and leaped for cover, which achieved the sole objective of the fleeing murderers at that point. No one else was hurt, as far as anyone knew. There were more shots fired from the side of the road. Both riders fell off their horses. Dan Tendle was standing in front of his wagon with a gun in each hand. Then he left in his wagon.

Sheriff Coren scanned all directions, enabled by being the tallest person in Roysbrook. Dan was nowhere in sight. His scan fell on Nora's window. His daughter's hands no longer covered her mouth and her eyes stared at her father.

Coren wondered aloud whether Dan was justified in firing at the two men, since Dan could not have known what happened in the saloon. There was a brief silence until someone confidently invented that the lead rider pointed his gun toward Dan while in the process of shooting up the town. This late-coming flake of testimony mustered a burgeoning chorus defining Dan's actions as self defense. The sheriff realized there was no point in further pursuing his queries.

The undertaker, who had been inspecting the bodies, pronounced admiringly there were a pair of bullet holes separated by a few inches in the center of each chest. He further surmised their hearts were likely torn apart, resulting in quick deaths.

Leaving the scene and leaving cleanup in the hands of the undertaker, Sheriff Coren returned home and found Nora still in her bedroom. She had hurried to her window upon hearing the haphazard gunfire of the galloping horsemen in the road. She arrived just in time to see what the sheltering townsfolk imagined.

Nora added her own testimony. Dan Tendle was next to his wagon with packages in his arms, standing in bright sunlight. The two horsemen were galloping down the road in his general direction. He was not reacting to the approaching gunmen at first. Both riders spotted him and rotated themselves and their aim in his direction. Dan must have spotted them with his peripheral vision at the same instant. He turned abruptly toward them, dropped his packages, drew two guns from their holsters on either side, shot both guns once, then a second time.

Her assessment of Dan's prowess was disconcerting news for the sheriff, as was her further description of how nonchalantly Dan reacted afterward.

Dan Tendle was an enigma in Roysbrook. All that was known about him was that he lived with his parents, was their only child, and was deaf and mute. Dan's deafness was the motivation for the sheriff wondering earlier about why Dan decided to fire at two men whom he could have mistaken for

committing no crime worse than disturbing the peace.

Nora was not yet done relating her own eyewitness account. In an agitated voice emoting how upset she still felt, she added that she and Dan had gazed at each other for several seconds after the shooting stopped.

Those who encountered Dan during one of his sorties into town were dismayed that Dan never looked anyone in the eyes. He pointed and relied on minimal gestures to convey requests, glancing only peripherally when the shopkeeper found it necessary to use minimal gestures in return. Dan neither offered nor responded to any gestures of pleasantries and did not appear to make any attempt to read lips. The experience always left others feeling like they encountered a pitifully broken dog.

The Tendles, “Ma” and “Pa,” as they referred to each other, were always cordial toward others when they attended church in town every Sunday. Dan did not accompany them to church because, well, to what avail? There was a secondary motivation. The Tendles hated to see how others reacted to their son: pointing, whispering among themselves, staring.

Pa used to take Dan with him when he went into town for the required, routine tasks there. As Dan grew older, Ma and Pa agreed that Dan should go alone because their son needed to be able to fend for himself when Ma and Pa would no longer be around.

The Tendles were above suspicion of abuse or neglect of their son. Nonetheless, Sheriff Coren felt obliged to ride out to the Tendle farm one day, a few years ago. He was the only one outside the family who knew where the farm was because Ma previously convinced Pa someone trustworthy should be privy to their secret in case of an emergency.

There was no evidence Dan was being mistreated; though evidence of abuse would rarely be observable to a visitor, even an unanticipated visitor. More convincing was that when Dan returned from farm chores through the back door while the sheriff was in the front room of the house with the Tendles, the boy entered their room with a genuine smile on his face. Surprised at finding a visitor, Dan immediately averted his eyes and left. Neither Ma nor Pa seemed perturbed and neither offered any relevant comment. The sheriff likewise spoke not of it and left soon thereafter.

Only Ma and Pa ever witnessed their son uttering sounds. He cried normally as a baby and instinctive sounds emanated, such as when experiencing sudden pain. The family developed, out of necessity, a rudimentary sign language. Dan never tried to emulate speech and his parents gave up encouraging such endeavors long ago. With his parents — and only with his parents — Dan was a usually happy child and, by then, a usually happy seventeen year old young man, routinely smiling while looking at each of his parents directly, affectionately. Still, Ma and Pa admitted to themselves

something was “not quite right” with their child besides deafness. They had no understanding of what that might be. Back then, no one else understood autism, either; let alone the panoply of its potential manifestations.

Pa learned long ago that law abiding citizens could not rely strictly on the law, especially if living out of town. He became adept with his lever action Winchester rifle and greatly enjoyed shooting target practice in the secluded hills behind the farm. Ma disapproved of guns and, as a result, reacted poorly to the sound of gunfire. Practicing well out of earshot of the house was an acceptable compromise.

When Dan was twelve, Pa snuck his son out to the hills for one of those practice sessions. The boy was immediately enthralled with shooting and excitedly waved his arms, which was a plea to be allowed to try. With minimal coaching and by the end of firing his first magazine, he was already hitting the target. By the end of firing his second magazine, he was hitting that target as accurately as his father.

Ma noticed her two boys returning together. Multiple entreatments from Pa coupled with appeals from Dan finally overcame Ma's remonstrations. Henceforth, Dan accompanied Pa whenever Pa went shooting.

Stationary target practice graduated into more distant targets, then into moving targets — the rigging of which were father-and-son bonding projects. Son quickly surpassed father in marksmanship. Dan had no anticipation nor reaction to the loud sound of the rifle firing next to his deaf ear that barely precedes the bullet's exit from the barrel: an inherent source of slight error with which even the best sharpshooters of the day struggled. The young man had a talent for holding a half breath and remaining rigid yet calm as he squeezed the trigger smoothly with uniform pressure. He developed the ability to quickly sense range, gauge motion, detect any breeze on his face, and intuitively adjust his aim to compensate for all.

Pa bought Dan his own rifle when the boy was thirteen. By then, an improved version of Pa's Winchester Model 1873 was available for purchase. His son received the Model 1886. Pa fought back a tear upon seeing Dan's exuberance at receiving the gift he was so hoping for.

Soon, Dan needed more of a challenge. His father bought a pair of double action, Colt six-shooters with gun belt for Dan a year later. Colt originally had some reliability problems when they introduced their double action model about a decade earlier. The ones Pa purchased were tried and true.

These gifts were expensive, plus father and son were using a lot of ammunition. Fortunately, the Tendle farm was financially comfortable. There were worse “addictions” that same money could have been spent on, instead, but were not. None of the family threesome partook of alcohol, for example, nor

did anyone in the family gamble.

The double action innovation cocked the hammer as the trigger was squeezed and then released the hammer to fire the bullet at the end of the trigger pull. Prior to double action, a shooter cocked the hammer of a single action gun with the palm of one hand before pulling the trigger with the other hand that was holding the gun. Carrying two guns used to only provide the benefit of having extra bullets loaded in the second gun because only one gun could be wielded at a time.

With double action, a gunslinger could fire two guns at the same time, theoretically. That required significant ambidexterity plus a lot more practice with a lot more ammunition. Dan had that dexterity and Pa was pleased to purchase the needed ammunition. Almost no other gunslinger possessed both advantages.

Learning to draw quickly and aim accurately with pistols, especially with both guns simultaneously, did not come as easily as learning to aim the Winchester rifle. Pa never owned hand guns and was only able to poorly emulate a duelist’s actions. He heard from others and passed on to his son the advice to only load five bullets into their chambers initially in case novice Dan might pull the trigger while drawing the guns from their holsters. Other than that, Dan was on his own, which deepened this new challenge, to the boy's delight.

After a while, holding one gun in each hand, Dan could consistently hit stationary targets with both six-shooters, individually and together; then hitting moving targets equally well. Next, he achieved comparable accuracy while firing immediately after rapidly drawing his guns from their holsters. Dan quickly grew confident enough to forego his father’s advisement for keeping an empty, first chamber.

Pa and Dan built their most complex target for Dan to practice against. This wooden silhouette of a gunslinger had two hidden ropes, each attached to a movable limb, one on each side. A thick block of wood with a bullseye was placed on a narrow stand positioned a few inches in front of the silhouette's chest. Pa could be out of sight, a few feet away behind a large rock, and tug one rope or the other without tipping off his son as to which side or when the slight movement of a wooden limb would occur.

By requiring Dan to draw solely after seeing movement of the target's limb, Pa instilled in Dan the protocol to wait for the bad guy to go for his gun first. Alas, some of the abstract nuances in determining who is a bad guy was beyond the ability of their shared, rudimentary sign language. Pa settled on communicating to shoot someone only in self defense or when commanded by someone wearing a badge. He made it clear self defense was the higher priority.

Dan became frustrated on those rare occasions he missed the designated bullseye. Gradually, Pa

imbued his son with the understanding that perfection is a venerable goal, but a delusional expectation.

Fathers tend to derive pride vicariously from an offspring's achievements and Pa was no exception. He was thrilled to see how delighted was his son whenever they would go shooting in the hills. However, he could not rid himself of his concern over what his son might someday do with his guns and ability to use them.

That was precisely the concern that surged into Sheriff Coren's mind upon hearing his daughter describe Dan's speed, accuracy, and nonchalance in gunning down the galloping murderers. Coren's disquietude was further exacerbated upon hearing her ancillary recollection of Dan then staring at her. Might a pitifully broken dog rise up someday and become an indomitable, unprincipled killer? After all, Dan was “not normal,” obviously. A well known adage cautioning against trusting a wild animal visited the sheriff's mind. Hot on that adage's heels, flashed the too-well-learned knowledge that humans are capable of being the least trustworthy members of the animal kingdom.

It was true that Dan felt no regret, guilt, doubt, or gratification over having ended the lives of two men. Neither did he experience any fear nor adrenaline rush during the event or afterward. For him, seeing a gun pointed at him was merely an unexpected opportunity for another practice session.

Dan did not communicate to his parents the events of that afternoon. He realized Ma would be upset with the news he had shot human targets and he somehow sensed both his parents might be upset with any news regarding the woman in the second floor window.

Three days later, Dan loaded freshly shorn fleece into the wagon to deliver for sale in town. Had there been an intervening Sunday, Ma and Pa would have learned about what Dan had done and Ma would have demanded Dan not take any trip into town for a week, maybe a month, maybe ever.

Townsfolk came out to see Dan, growing in numbers as word spread. He appeared unaware of the more than usual degree of attention but his peripheral vision spied it and he was correspondingly more than usually uncomfortable because of it. Thankfully, no gawker approached him. There was a sense of awe and foreboding among residents that a heroic but “not normal” killer was in their presence.

Errands completed, Dan rode his wagon toward home. He looked up at Nora's window. No one was there this time. He was disappointed.

Nora was nineteen years old and average in height, proportions, and face; all of which could be observed only after becoming inured to the sight of her thick profusion of undulating, red hair, which she wore shoulder length. Cultures throughout history forced women, especially married women, to hide their hair out of fear the sight would be too alluring for men to withstand. Neither Nora nor her

father subscribed to that tenet.

Dan had not seen Nora prior to accidentally spotting her after shooting the galloping murderers three days earlier. He also never saw red hair. He briefly assumed her motionless frame was a mannequin, like in the dry goods store, until he detected a glistening in her eyes. He stared a few seconds longer as the sight of her forced its way into his memory, secured there forevermore. Dan was unmistakably “not normal” in important ways, but his hormones were normal.

Noteworthy by its absence was any accompanying understanding of why he was disappointed not to see her again in the window. The Tendle family sign language did not include that concept and Dan's parents expected and hoped they would never need to face that task.

Sunday arrived in Roysbrook and so did Ma and Pa. They learned the same story Sheriff Coren learned from the same eager witnesses five days earlier. Neither Nora nor the sheriff repeated to anyone Nora's private testimony to her father. Therefore, the Tendles were still blissfully ignorant of that postscript. The rest of the story was already more than Ma and Pa could handle. They listened stoically, shielding their emotions behind the pretext of appropriate reverence required on Sundays. Roysbrook was convinced Dan defended himself; but Roysbrook concurrently believed Dan was a highly trained, heartless killer.

Later, at home, their emotions were unleashed. Ma and Pa had not had a strongly worded disagreement in a very long time. Dan understood only that this was something to avoid, so he left the house and found chores. When venting finally subsided, there was nothing else to do but go on as before. All the damage that could be done was done and could not be undone. Pa confidently assured his wife that Dan would not use his guns for any purpose other than defending himself or innocent people. In the end, Ma chose to believe him. In the end, Pa chose to believe it, too. They had no better alternative.

The two recently-dead murderers came to Roysbrook to meet three henchmen. Their impulsive shooting of the local card sharp forced them to flee before their three compatriots arrived; or, rather, to attempt to flee. The other three soon came to town and learned from too talkative residents the fate of their two accomplices at the hands of Dan.

All five strangers were murderers, each more than once. The purpose of their pre-arranged rendezvous in the small town of Roysbrook was to avoid detection while they plotted their next exploit and while they enjoyed the spoils of the exploit they accomplished two weeks earlier in a much bigger town. They were certain no one in Roysbrook would yet know they were wanted by law enforcement in that bigger town and no one in Roysbrook would think much of a handful of drifters drifting in and then out of town. That happened occasionally, ordinarily.

More questioning of too talkative townsfolk revealed Dan came in to town every few days or so. Which day? — that was unpredictable, but it was always in the late morning or early afternoon. It did not occur to anyone that Dan might no longer be allowed to come, which was Ma's opening demand the prior Sunday upon getting home from church.

As mentioned, Dan was adjudged immediately by the crowd as having acted legally, in self defense. The dead men's three collaborators reached a unanimous, contrary verdict and granted themselves authority to carry out sentencing.

Three against one were good odds, but the threesome decided not good enough, especially if the tales of Dan's marksmanship were remotely true. They planned to exact revenge before this local hero could begin to display his abilities, whatever those abilities actually were. The threesome waited.

Unlike their two predecessors, these three outlaws used their time wisely, obtaining a description of Dan and observing that no resident wore a gun belt except the lone sheriff who partook of midday naps. Their plan was to move their horses and lash them across the road from whichever building Dan entered. Accurately aiming while on horseback being problematic, they would first kill him as he emerged, then leap on their horses, and be gone before the sheriff deduced what happened. They put that plan into action upon hearing the excited buzz about hero Dan's arrival. A query elicited that Dan was in the dry goods store.

The shopkeeper's son, William, gathered Dan's purchases to put them in Dan's wagon while the shopper settled accounts with William's father. William often performed similarly for customers other than Dan and was particularly eager to extend that service to a hero that day. Three men milled about across the road, blending in with the people who came to behold their hero. They were in bright sunlight and could not see clearly into the open doorway of the store, which was shielded from the sun by an overhang. When William came through that doorway, laden with Dan's purchases, the three outlaws drew their guns and shot him multiple times. The victim fell backward against a wall and rebounded into the road, landing face down.

Dan had his back to the doorway but glimpsed the shopkeeper's horrified reaction and instantly turned to see William lying motionless just beyond the doorway. The shopkeeper bolted through the door and crouched by his dead son. Dan followed and stepped out into the sunlit road, confused.

The murderers were all mounted by that time, each still with his gun in his hand. People were scrambling for cover. Dan saw the three men on horseback but understood none of what was happening. The lead horseman glanced back toward the store prior to urging his steed onward. He saw a man in front wearing a gun belt and, presuming it had to be Dan, swiveled his torso and gun toward Dan and fired. Dan understood that.

In a kill or be killed situation, a gunfighter battles against innate fear of death, which exhorts him to pull the trigger before his gun is aimed and steadied. The alarmed horseman lost that battle that day. His first shot shattered the storefront window. By contrast, for Dan, targets were not fearsome. The horseman received neither a reprieve nor a second chance. A pair of bullets ripped through his heart.

The other mounted murderers turned in their saddles toward the sound of gunfire and likewise swiveled their chests and guns in that direction. Again, Dan's reaction, reflexive from realistic practice, was fast and accurate.

Also reflexive, though ingrained from just one prior occurrence, Dan looked up toward Nora's window and saw her hurriedly arriving there. They met eyes, as before, but for only an instant. She diverted her attention to the storefront where she extracted from the shadow William’s father holding a motionless body. Dan recognized her reaction denoted a tormented scream. Seconds later she came bursting into and then across the road, running to the body of her betrothed, where she crouched and lamented along with William's father.

Sheriff Coren emerged, repeating the same process for the second time in a little over a week: strapping his gun belt, missing inessential accouterments, and receiving reports from agitated witnesses. Dan did not try to retrieve his purchases this time because his purchases were scattered among people aggregating near William's body. He climbed into his wagon and headed slowly for home. Between the clamoring witnesses and the expanding mourning for William, no one noticed Dan leaving.

In contrast to the prior shootout, there were witnesses who truly saw and attested to Dan firing in response to guns being pointed and fired toward him. They saw and attested to Dan’s speed in drawing and firing his two revolvers. The undertaker reaffirmed his prior attestation regarding Dan’s marksmanship.

Previously, following Dan's shooting of the two riders, Sheriff Coren presumed Dan communicated to his parents what had happened. The reactions of Ma and Pa the prior Sunday invalidated that presumption. That realization alone would have compelled Coren to ride out to the farm. By the time he left, the sheriff needed to also inform the Tendles of still newer developments about which Dan was unaware.

Coren, having pushed his horse to permit returning home before nightfall, arrived at the Tendle farm shortly after Dan did. Ma and Pa were already perplexed that Dan did not have with him what he went to purchase. Seeing the sheriff riding up to the house exacerbated their apprehension. Dan fled the house when, upon following his parents' eyes, he saw the sheriff through a front window lashing his horse. He fled not out of anticipation that Coren was coming to impart ill of him. After all, he had simply engaged in acceptable self defense. He fled for the standard reason: to avoid being around

anyone other than Ma and Pa when his presence in the company of others was not required.

Ma displayed no emotion upon hearing the fresh news that Dan had gunned down three more murderers in self defense. Unlike on the prior Sunday, her subdued reaction was not out of deference to religious mores. By this point, Ma had resigned herself to losing her son to guns, one way or another. She hated it and wished it did not have to be that way. Yet she accepted there was nothing she could do to prevent it. There would be terrible heartache in the future — all that remained was when and how. She blamed her husband and resented him for exposing Dan to guns against her wishes. As dictated by the culture, she kept those feelings inside her as best she could. Still, Pa did not need to ask why she was sullen since Sunday.

Pa studied his wife apprehensively. Seeing no reaction, he did his best to hide his own reaction. He was bursting with pride.

There was a second part to the sheriff's news. Coren described what took place immediately prior to Dan defending himself. Both Ma and Pa expressed sincere remorse and declared they would go to Roysbrook the next morning and offer condolences.

That served as a segue for the final part of what Sheriff Coren came to report. He strongly advised against any of the Tendles going to town for quite a while. Ma and Pa waited for an explanation.

Several townsfolk who gathered in the road after the shooting recalled the three dead men having asked about Dan. A consensus quickly emerged that the three murderers were stalking Dan to avenge the deaths of the prior two and must have mistaken William for Dan. They decided William would be alive if Dan had previously ducked for cover like everyone else when the two strangers galloped out of town after killing the card sharp. They blamed Dan for William's death.

Coren's daughter, Nora, also blamed Dan. Blaming the murderers was insufficient for Nora because they were dead. She did not blame the loquacious residents who bragged to the murderers about what Dan did because the residents were neighbors, friends, and fellow congregants. She had to hurl her anguish against someone. A scapegoat was needed. Dan was the only one left.

Ma asked why she and Pa should also not go to town. The sheriff said people decided it had to be Pa who taught Dan to shoot. Two scapegoats were better than one.

Pa seethed silently at the prattling townsfolk and at a sheriff who did not prevent three strangers from trying to murder his son. Scapegoats proliferated.

With patience from both father and son, Pa was able to make Dan understand why visits to Roysbrook would no longer happen. Dan was overtly dejected. Pa surmised his son was pained upon discerning how people blamed others without justification. However, Dan owned no positive views of humanity in the first place, other than of his parents. Dan was suffering from a memory of red hair rushing past him to dead William. He did not try to communicate the actual source of his dejection.

Haystack

Shooting practice in the hills behind the farm continued as before. Father and son refused to allow recent events to place a pall over their favorite, shared pastime.

There was another town, Haystack, almost twice as far as Roysbrook from the Tendle farm and in the opposite direction. The roughly biweekly, half-day, Roysbrook roundtrip needed to be replaced by a roughly weekly, full day, Haystack roundtrip.

Pa and Dan made the inaugural journey together several days after Sheriff Coren delivered his news at the farm. Pa wanted to study the reception Dan would receive, establish good relations with shopkeepers, and get past shocked peepers before Dan would be sent on his own like he had to Roysbrook. Despite being uncomfortable in the presence of others, the young man was pleased to take these trips because of how much he enjoyed both being alone and having tasks to accomplish. Pa enjoyed neither.

Haystack was five times as large as Roysbrook in both extent and population. Residents referred to their town as a city and corrected any visitor who did not.

There were three churches in Haystack with the attendant, vying congregations. Not wanting to take sides and not relishing devoting all of each Sunday to the excursion, Ma and Pa decided not to attend church anymore.

Haystack had a sheriff and two official deputies. Pa and Dan noted several other residents wearing gun belts, presumably in case law enforcement officers needed backup support at a moment's notice or in case no lawman was present when needed. Compared to Roysbrook, there was more wealth in Haystack to both attract thieves and with which to pay badge-wearers to keep thieves at bay.

Upon arriving in Haystack for the inaugural visit, Pa introduced himself and his son to Sheriff Groden, Deputy Randolph, and Deputy Miller. Pa expected one or more itinerant merchants already conveyed to the people of Haystack the happenings in Roysbrook and he wanted to tell his side of the stories they may have heard.

Pa's expectation was well founded. Haystack's law enforcers recognized Dan as soon as they saw him. To Pa's delight, they were pleased to “meet” Dan and appeared tolerant of Dan's telltale lack of social skills. Beyond that, Dan's aptitude was of particular interest to the sheriff and his deputies.

Pa assured them that Dan only shoots in self defense or if someone wearing a badge commands him

to shoot. The prospect of another, law-abiding citizen in town wearing a gun belt, even if only occasionally present, was welcomed; although the sheriff concealed the misgivings he shared with his counterpart in Roysbrook over how well Pa's assurances could be trusted regarding a young man who was "not normal." Sheriff Groden declared with a slightly inhibited smile, "We hear he shoots good."

Shopkeepers and residents divined who Dan was. Word spread. More residents assembled to offer congratulations and well wishes to Dan through his father. The citizens of Haystack received Dan as a hero not because they were more reasonable than the residents of Roysbrook in laying both blame and credit where they actually belonged. Rather, it was because Haystack at that moment did not need a scapegoat for the loss of a favorite son. Accordingly, Pa did not need to relate his side of the stories. He was thrilled and confident Ma would be in much better spirits when he would later tell her what transpired.

Three months after the inaugural trip to Haystack, there arose an opportunity for Sheriff Groden, et al., to reap a benefit from welcoming Dan among them. One would not likely have predicted it would occur outside the city. Dan was riding the farm's wagon westward, toward Haystack, still twenty minutes out from the city. The trail far ahead of him veered gently to his right. He spotted a low cloud of dust a half mile away along the trail. A larger cloud appeared about three hundred yards behind the first. Both clouds were progressing toward him rapidly.

The lead cloud was from a single horseman. The second cloud shrouded more than one horseman, their number not discernible yet. The clouds sequentially disappeared from Dan's view as the trail bent behind a butte in front of Dan before it curved back around the face of the butte to where Dan waited, his wagon halted.

Dan always brought his Winchester rifle in the wagon, hidden under a tattered blanket. Pa figured no one would look under such an inconspicuous rag. Dan stayed in the seat of his wagon, took his rifle in his hands, and prepared for possible target practice if it turned out to be allowable.

The front rider, monitoring his pursuers, failed to notice the wagon from a distance. He traversed the curve and abruptly confronted Dan. Horse and rider were both startled because the wagon blocked the trail. The horse stopped abruptly of its own volition and the rider caught sight of the Winchester.

Dan was stolidly pointing his rifle toward the sky, which the rider interpreted to imply Dan was daring him to go for his gun or else try to get away. The rider calculated he could not draw his own rifle from his saddle scabbard nor draw his six-shooter from its holster before the man in the wagon would certainly shoot him at such close range. He contemplated bolting off the trail to get away. He realized he would get a slow start due to his horse having stopped. Again the likelihood the wagon man might miss seemed too remote.

In contrast to Dan avoiding eye contact with people, Dan always stared intensely at targets and potential targets. A limb might twitch on one side or other of a wooden silhouette — or of its human doppelgänger — at any instant.

The rider's mouth moved intermittently over the course of the next thirty seconds. Dan gleaned nothing from what was being said and did not react at all.

Lions battling for dominance intimidate with load roaring. A lion falling silent intimates accepting defeat. Humans likewise bellow to intimidate. Perhaps because humans talk and yell habitually, words when humans battle are expected; whereas unwavering silence accompanied by impassive demeanor can be exceptionally unnerving. Silence speaks of confidence — no need to bluff with bravado. Dan was privy to none of that. Nevertheless, it worked. The rider slowly raised his arms.

The other riders' views were obstructed by the first rider's dust cloud. They also failed to notice the wagon from a distance. They did notice a lack of a dust cloud farther ahead on the trail beyond the blind curve and guessed their quarry had dismounted on the other side of the curve and was waiting to ambush them. They stopped their horses and dismounted. Deputy Miller cautiously crept around the curve, keeping close to the cliff, and beheld a refreshing sight with his apprehensive, dust-filled eyes.

In a cheerful tone of voice, Miller called for the others to come forward. The sheriff and deputies had a code among themselves for situations like this. A call to come was legitimate if spoken cheerfully. Otherwise, the caller had a gun pointing at him and was being forced to call for his allies. In this case, Miller's tone was so cheerful the other two law enforcers retained marginal qualms as to what that might signify.

Their quarry was a small-time thief who robbed a shopkeeper and immediately fled. The chase turned out to be shorter than anticipated, to the delight of all three chasers. Sheriff Groden and Deputy Randolph apprehended the thief and prepared to bring him back to Haystack.

Meanwhile, Deputy Miller tried to thank Dan. Miller kept moving around Dan's horses to be face-to-face with Dan, who was still seated in his wagon. Dan kept turning his face in response so as to view Miller peripherally. It was a comical dance routine which, fortunately for Miller, escaped observation by the others. Prompted recall of Pa explaining this quirk of his son induced Miller to stop dancing. His recollection included that Dan did not understand English and so could not read lips. Even so, the deputy spoke as he gestured — it is natural to do that.

Pa did not instruct the badge-wearers on any of the Tendle family sign language. Miller succeeded, anyway, in conveying his gratitude. That success was evinced by Dan briefly turning his face toward Miller with a minimal smile pushing up the corners of his mouth, before turning away again. The

deputy experienced a gratification more rewarding than from the success of the chase.

At another time and/or place, Deputy Miller would have been a teacher. He possessed an affinity with that role. Over the subsequent half year, Miller approached Dan every time Dan came to Haystack and engaged him in conversation. Their shared language quickly acquired the relevant gestures Dan used with his parents and then expanded beyond that.

Back when Pa first brought Dan to Haystack, Sheriff Groden confided to his deputies his concern that someone like Dan might be more likely to shoot under misinterpreted circumstances. He never mentioned it again, though that concern still played in the thoughts of all three badge-wearers. As soon as their shared language allowed, Miller derived satisfaction that Dan understood when to use his guns as well as Pa claimed. He then instructed Dan on more nuanced criteria.

Dan routinely communicated face-to-face with his new, one friend, relaxed and smiling; provided no one else was nearby. In effect, Dan allowed the deputy into his inner circle that, theretofore, included only his parents.

One day, when Dan arrived in Haystack, no person was in sight. Dan fished out his rifle before descending from his wagon. The storekeeper nearest the wagon appeared at his doorway and signaled with the universal hand movement urging Dan to enter. Unfortunately, no one other than Deputy Miller had access to Dan's language of less universal gestures. The shopkeeper was able to indicate something dangerous was happening farther down the road and badge-wearers were there. The shopkeeper pantomimed moving stealthily toward the danger, staying on his side of the road, and ended with the universal hand motion urging Dan to go there.

Dan exited the store and cautiously proceeded in the direction to which the shopkeeper pointed, moving from shelter to shelter quickly to minimize exposure to whatever lurking danger there might be. Soon, he spotted three badge-wearers plus two other men, all with guns, and all taking cover in a cluster of locations while facing a building on the opposite side of the road.

Groden caught motion peripherally and wheeled to engage. Dan believed there was no need to defend himself from Groden and did nothing. Miller's teaching earned a bonus. Groden recognized Dan and lowered his rifle. Groden caught Miller's attention and pointed at Dan.

Miller communicated the situation to Dan while still hidden from sight by anyone in the building opposite them. As it turned out, that communication was largely unnecessary because a man then stepped out of that building's doorway with his left arm around a woman's waist, restraining the woman in front of himself as a shield, and holding a six-shooter in his right hand with its barrel against his hostage's temple. The man’s head was stooped directly behind the woman's head so as to be almost

entirely hidden from the lawmen.

Dan was still thirty yards away from the lawmen and their supporting gunmen. The angle of his view afforded him a better sight of the man's head. Dan signaled a request for permission. Miller briefly considered granting it on his own authority. He deferred. Dan watched as the deputy turned toward Groden. Groden did not appear to react. Dan waited.

Hostage taker moved slowly toward a wagon a few feet from the doorway while maintaining his shield in a straight line between himself and those directly across the road. Dan saw the man's mouth move a few times. Then Groden's mouth moved a few times. Only Dan, off to the side and unseen by the man, had a plausible shot.

Groden looked over at Dan and turned to his deputy. Miller met Dan's eyes and nodded.

Dan took aim. This was a shot equivalent to so many he made in practice. It was just another target. The proximity of the woman was inconsequential because Dan would hit the target. That was how Dan would have seen the situation a year ago.

Detrimental ramifications almost always accompany well-intentioned changes. Miller taught Dan to more fully understand when it would be acceptable to use his guns. That introduced the student to the awareness of risk to innocent bystanders. Dan hesitated.

The hostage's peripheral vision detected a momentary glint of reflected sunlight from Dan's rifle. She pushed her eyes hard to her right without any other movement that might tip off her assailant. She recognized Dan from the clothes he always wore. She went limp, feigning fainting. Her head fell forward and thereby separated from her tormentor's head by a few extra inches.

Dan fired. The arm around the woman's waist gave way. She fell to her knees, turned around, saw what was left of the man's head, became aware that a missing portion was in her hair, and promptly ran back in the house to retch and wash.

The man was her husband; actually, former husband as of a moment earlier. He drank to excess repeatedly and abused her repeatedly, with high correlation between the two. A lawman was fetched in the past during those scenarios. The husband spent a night in jail sleeping it off on those occasions, but the repeats continued. This was the worst beating he administered to his wife and the first time he deployed his gun, screaming his intention to kill her. When the sheriff arrived, initially by himself, the husband opened fire on him from inside the building where husband and wife lived; fortunately with inebriated aim.

The episode would surely be a source of nightmares for her, start to finish — especially the finish. Any platitude expressing that things could have been worse never ameliorates such horrific memories. That said, it could have been worse; and that was said, often, by the residents of Haystack. In the same breath were the words praising the sharpshooter who prevented the situation from becoming worse. People managed to communicate gratitude to Dan.

Dan sustained strong resentment toward the people of Roysbrook since they turned against his family. Gradually, over the ensuing months, he began trusting Haystack well wishers, increasingly meeting their eyes, smiling back, returning gestured pleasantries. He sensed the residents of Haystack were pleased to see him when he came, rather than remarking at a freak among them. He felt and behaved less freaky when he was among them.

Although towns and "cities" in the territory were sedate most of the time, people were alert to the presence of strangers. Strangers were, with rare exception, either itinerant purveyors of specialized wares or passing through en route to some other destination. Most harbored no intention to be troublesome to law-abiding residents.

Sheriff Groden of Haystack went the extra mile to keep it that way. That was the motivation for his practice of "stranger-sitting" when a suspicion arose that a stranger might not conform to the unthreatening norm. A stranger wearing a gun belt particularly aroused such suspicion.

Excessive force by badge-wearers was proscribed unless and until someone broke a law — a handicap law enforcers were required to abide. However, the Haystack lawmen convinced themselves that, absent a convincingly trustworthy exposition of harmless intent from suspicious strangers, encouraging such strangers to leave Haystack sooner than later was acceptable procedure. The three lawmen, brandishing their rifles pointing downward, would surround the strangers. Groden would inquire as to the strangers' plans, etc., and then decide whether the badge-wearers would continue to patiently remain and watch them. This stranger-sitting tactic was standard operating procedure for Sheriff Groden, Deputy Randolph, and Deputy Miller in such circumstances.

Two unsavory looking characters, each wearing a gun belt, rode into Haystack one afternoon. Alerted by residents, the lawmen became immediately wary. Coincidentally, Dan visited that day. Miller would have asked Dan to accompany them on this stranger-sitting assignment, but Dan left for home a half hour before the badge-wearers learned of the presence of the two strangers. It would have been an in-field, follow-on lesson as to when shooting would or would not be justified.

The two strangers were imbibing a few drinks in a saloon. Three lawmen took up their positions. Groden's questions elicited only puerilely defiant words to salve bruised egos, emasculated by the rifle-bearing lawmen surrounding them. The two quenched their thirst, paid their bar bill, slowly walked

outside with an escort of lawmen, mounted their horses, and rode on eastward, the same direction they were going when they arrived. Stranger-sitting was successful.

The direction in which the two men were headed was the same Dan took toward his home. The Tendle farm was located between Haystack and Roysbrook but was not visible from the trail connecting the two municipalities due to a pair of intervening hills that rose a quarter of a mile south of the trail. Pa chose that location to start their farm largely because it would be hidden. The farm was accessed by turning southward from the trail and traversing a narrow, curved gap between those two hills.

To avoid creating a revealing extension of the trail to the gap, Dan would vary his point of departure from the trail and jostle through low, resilient undergrowth to reach the gap. Rather than turn abruptly off the trail, he would steer off gradually, almost parallel to the trail for a few yards, before turning toward the gap between the two hills. In the unlikely event of someone taking an interest in recent ruts from his wagon's wheels, that person might presume horses wandered off to nibble undergrowth while the wagon driver dozed briefly — an occurrence not terribly uncommon on long commutes in wagons pulled by horses versed in the well worn route.

On this occasion, Dan chose a departure point after overshooting the gap between the hills and gradually turned the wagon southwesterly. The two men coerced to leave Haystack, being on horseback rather than in a wagon, caught up with Dan enough to see his wagon in the distance reach the gap leading toward the Tendle farm.

Dan brought the wagon to its usual place, unhitched the horses, and began leading them to the barn behind the house. His peripheral vision spotted the two riders approaching.

This was a desecration of the Tendles' hidden sanctuary. They learned the secret. They could tell others. He was livid. Dan turned toward them and unbuckled his Colt six-shooters. Their transgression competed savagely with inculcated restrictions for using his guns.

Facing double fisted readiness, and realizing they could not draw their guns quickly while on horseback and were still too far away to shoot accurately, especially while mounted, one of the invaders lifted an empty hand while his mouth started moving. The man kept speaking ineffective words intended to put Dan at ease. However, the uplifted hand was effective in that it engendered further, internal debate.

Were they merely thirsty or needed some other form of assistance? Deputy Miller taught that killing them would not be justified if that were all they sought. Sheriff Coren knew the location of the Tendle farm. Pa told Coren long ago in case something bad were to happen. Coren visited the farm in the past,

as Dan recalled too well. Maybe Coren told others in Roysbrook. Maybe he told these two and they were stopping to ask for something or to buy something. Dan delayed the potential executions.

While Dan wrestled with himself, the two men dismounted, one keeping up the unheard monologue. They misinterpreted Dan's initial, facial expression of shock to imply fear. With that bias established in their minds, they then misinterpreted his subsequent, facial expression of wide-eyed fury as further corroboration. Surely, this inexperienced kid half their age could be easily dispatched and then they would help themselves to whatever they find. After all, there was no one else in sight.

Most gunslingers of that time grew up with single action six-shooters. As described earlier, single action required using the palm of one hand to cock the hammer before the hand holding the gun pulled the trigger. The palm slamming on the hammer coupled with the desire to shoot quickly once the hammer was cocked reduced accuracy. After cocking the hammer, some gunslingers pressed the empty hand on top of the hand holding the gun. This served two symbiotic purposes: steady the gun hand and be positioned to rapidly cock the hammer repeatedly for additional shots, since the first shot was likely to miss either partially or totally.

Despite dual action hand guns gradually displacing single action ones over the prior decade, rigid habits were not easily changed. Gunslingers who tried to practice dueling while leaving their empty hands at their sides derived poorer results initially, as is common with trying most anything new. Patience and perseverance were required to take full advantage of their double action guns, but those qualities were in short supply among middle-aged gunslingers. Most refused to believe improved results were plausible by not cocking the hammer.

Gunslingers developed an intuitive sense of how close they wanted to be to their opponent in a duel. The empirical formula was driven by the expected accuracy of the first shot from the hip. The next generation of gunfighters who grew up with double action revolvers could engage an opponent at a longer range with the same accuracy the older gunslingers could only achieve at closer range. Dan was a member of that next generation. His adversaries that day were not.

The two men facing Dan continued to slowly approach him, reducing the value of Dan's greater accurate-range-advantage with each step. Concurrently, the two men moved gradually apart from each other to make it difficult for Dan to monitor both equally well. When they would reach their desired locations, they would stop and wait for Dan's eyes to move to one of them. The other would then draw his gun. Dan would be encumbered due to being the second man to start to draw plus his reaction would be hampered by needing to shift focus to the other man who would be drawing first.

This strategy worked well for the partners before. The triumph of that strategy relied greatly on their intended victim not drawing while the men were walking. Walking impeded the speed of their own reactions. They believed their steady stream of assuaging monologue was lulling this intended victim

into the torpor they required.

Dan felt confused. He did not comprehend the strategy the men were using but he felt his confidence slipping evermore as the two men continued to come closer and separate farther from each other. It was like a mongoose befuddling a cobra before going in for the kill, except there were two mongooses.

Dan finally decided irrevocably they were going to engage him in a gunfighting duel. Pa taught him defending himself was sacrosanct but let the other guy go for his gun first. Dan waited.

Dan never fought a real gunfighting duel or witnessed one. He practiced many times against the fancy target with twitch-able limbs he and Pa built to simulate one. In practicing, there was only one such target and Dan would draw and fire both guns together at the one target. He did not practice shooting his two Colts at two targets simultaneously. Furthermore, the practice sessions could not simulate what happens in a duel before the target's limb twitches, obviously.

Agitation supplanted the prior confusion in Dan's mind. He discarded one of Pa's lessons and embraced the higher priority one. He drew his six-shooters and opened fire.

The two men were certain their strategy was working, so their focus was apportioned between performing their strategy and watching for Dan's hands to move. This partitioning compounded their vulnerability while still moving. Neither got off a shot.

Two bullets pierced the chest on the right. Then two bullets pierced the chest on the left. Another pair of bullets were added to the carnage of each man's upper torso as they crumbled toward the ground. Two more pairs of bullets riddled the corpses on the ground. Each of the Colts' hammers clicked again, this time with empty chambers.

These men were not merely targets like in the past. They were invaders who burrowed under his self confidence and forced him to draw first. Dan stood still, trembling from the burst of adrenaline.

Pa arrived first, still holding the pitchfork he was using in the barn. Ma arrived soon thereafter, still holding the clippers she was using to shear a sheep. A perfunctory glance from each adequately assessed the status of the two men lying on the ground. His parents approached Dan and all three hugged together for a full minute, as if the parents were trying to keep their son from collapsing while waiting for the adrenaline rush to wear off.

Later, in the house, after what seemed like a much longer amount of time passed than did, Dan set about communicating to his parents what happened. That process was painstakingly slow because there

was no need previously to develop gestures for conveying some of the emotions Dan endured that day. Dan relied heavily on re-enactment. Re-enactment helped Dan subdue his residual emotions, which a modern therapist would refer to as catharsis.

Dan hesitated to communicate that he drew his guns first. He eventually added that detail while displaying contrition in his manner. Pa gladly and sincerely granted absolution without any admonition regarding future conduct. That was cathartic, as well, and instantly became a well learned lesson on acceptable exceptions.

In the past, others cleaned up bodies after Dan shot them. He had no idea what to do next. Pa led the way. All three family members returned to the front of the house and buried the two men in an unmarked location. None of them ever shared what happened that day with anyone else.

Rewards

The trail between Roysbrook and Haystack, and continuing for another five miles to the west of Haystack, often weaved past hills or among them. The hills were outcrops up to a hundred feet high sporting meager vegetation. A section of the hills to the west of Haystack were riddled with naturally formed, shallow caves. People routinely sheltered among them, their numbers varying by season over the course of the year. Some holed up there for the night and then pressed on in the morning. Some took up residence there due to antisocial propensities, mental health problems, limited resources, or a combination thereof. Occasionally, there were one or more fugitives from the law residing among those hills.

A handful of residents from Hilltown — as the cave dwellers referred to their scattered caves — straggled into Haystack one afternoon. They went straight to Sheriff Groden and direly proclaimed three gunmen came to Hilltown and dispossessed them of their caves. There were posters on the wall of the sheriff's office with sketches of men wanted for murder, among other crimes. The refugees' accusations were amplified by their selection of three of those posters depicting the men they saw. Those Abottill brothers' posters stated, “Wanted — Dead or Alive,” with a $400 reward for each. The refugees sketched for Groden a map of Hilltown, marking the locations of the most accommodating caves.

The Abottill brothers grew up in Haystack. They were wont to engage in mischief but no one anticipated they would eventually become murderers. How common it is that neighbors of a miscreant interviewed by a modern day reporter respond they had no idea what their neighbor was capable of.

The brothers signed on to a cattle drive several years back and soon thereafter began earning the distinction of having sketches of them appearing on “Wanted — Dead or Alive” posters. They had not returned to Haystack since that cattle drive.

As news-bearing Hilltown residents trickled in that afternoon, long time citizens of Haystack reinvigorated a slumbering campaign among themselves blaming the father of the brothers. Mr. Abottill, Sr., was a stern parent, deeply religious, who tolerated no transgressions. Yet, the more the father disciplined his sons, the more the sons stepped out of line. His three sons left home and joined the cattle drive in direct defiance of their father's insistent opposition. When Haystack residents initially began blaming him for his boys becoming outlaws, Mr. Abottill moved to Roysbrook and lived reclusively, except for attending church there.

The sheriff and deputies debated what to do about this situation. Hunting dangerous criminals would be … dangerous. However, reaping rewards would be … rewarding.

They considered forming a posse and going into the hills. While each of the handful of Haystack residents who toted a gun belt stoked his ego professing he was ready to help lawmen, none were adept with a six-shooter. Nor were any of them adept with a rifle. A posse, even if it could be recruited, would not likely increase the chances of success but would require splitting reward money more ways if success were achieved. That suggestion was rapidly tabled, permanently.

Miller then suggested they ask Dan to go with them. They agreed his shooting skills would be valuable in the hills. Miller conjectured his own ability to communicate silently with Dan could be an asset during the hunt. Sheriff Groden gingerly probed whether Dan had the capacity to properly weigh his best interests in making such a decision. Miller asserted Dan did. He also predicted Dan would want to collect a share of such lucrative rewards. Miller even proffered the trivial point that splitting the reward money four ways would be easier in case they did not get all three brothers.

No one knew when Dan would next come to Haystack. If the lawmen did not act quickly, the Abottills might flee before the lawmen acted. The badge-wearers weighed that against the prospect of being pinned down among boulders in an ambush without a sharpshooter on their side able to hit a briefly exposed limb or face. They decided to wait.

Dan arrived four days later. Miller communicated fairly both the opportunity and the risk. Dan responded that he would finish his chores in Haystack that day and return on horseback the following morning. He was eager to accompany them. The lawmen equally eagerly interpreted Dan's eagerness to constitute informed consent.

Three badge-wearers with their sharpshooter adjunct left Haystack on foot around noon the subsequent day. An hour later, the hunters approached the first cave denoted by Hilltown refugees. It was not deemed a most likely place to find the Abottill brothers — the fourth and fifth caves were — but it was the first candidate encountered en route from Haystack. A methodical, orderly search of the caves was chosen to reduce the risk of being bushwhacked from behind if one or more of the brothers were holed up in a plausible cave that was skipped. Quietly, slowly, they converged on the cave opening and finally peered inside. There was no indication of recent activity within this first cave, the connotation of “recent” in this context being since Hilltown refugees overran Groden's office.

By late afternoon, with the first four plausible caves approached and explored, all devoid of interesting evidence, Deputy Randolph voiced the presumptions that everyone was thinking, as follows. The brothers had to realize one or more residents of Hilltown would escape to Haystack and identify the brothers by their wanted posters. The brothers must have anticipated lawmen or even a posse would then search the caves looking for them. He concluded the Abottills were probably no longer in Hilltown. Moreover, the hunters did not want to be in Hilltown after dusk unless the Abottills were all dead. Nevertheless, with just enough time left before dusk to proceed to the fifth cave, the hunters were impelled by the need to perform their duty with due diligence; and by some greed, too. They all agreed they would walk back to Haystack after exploring the fifth cave unless their mission was accomplished.

Randolph’s presumptions were correct, but not his conclusion. A month earlier, during a rare fit of introspection, the three brothers admitted aloud among themselves it would only be a matter of time — a short time, most likely — before they would be killed or hung. The youngest Abottill held a daring idea in abeyance until such a moment. He proposed to his brothers they go back home to Haystack and become its lawmen. They would hide from the law as respectable badge-wearers, getting paid a legitimate salary, instead of continuing to rob banks, stagecoaches, etc. Haystack was far away from real cities. No one would come looking for them there.

After scoffs and jibes subsided, the youngest brother fleshed out his idea. They would kill the badge-wearers in Haystack, whoever they were at that time. Haystack would desperately need to find replacements. The brothers would then plead their innocence of their alleged crimes and offer their services to become the sheriff and deputies. People would rationalize that the brothers came home and deserved the opportunity to make things right because the alternative would be going without law enforcement protection for an indefinite period of time.

The oldest Abottill brother interrupted, asking why people would accept pleas of innocence after they killed Haystack's lawmen. That segued to the next part of the youngest Abottill’s idea. The brothers would lure the lawmen out of town to kill them, leaving no one aware of what became of the former badge-wearers. They would deny having even seen the lawmen.

Elder Abottill posited the obvious follow-on question, which prompted the final part of the idea. They would go to Hilltown and dispossess cave dwellers. The dispossessed would flee to Haystack, so it would become known the brothers were hiding in Hilltown. The Haystack lawmen would come looking for them, not being able to pass up the opportunity to collect the rewards. Provisions to eat while they waited for the lawmen to arrive would be scrounged from the captured caves.

They realized the plan was insane. Surely, even if they succeeded in replacing Haystack lawmen, word would quickly spread and bounty hunters would quickly descend on Haystack. Yet that plan started sounding plausible to them, and then attractive. It had to, in light of their alternative future that they finally acknowledged.

Following a day inducing the departure of Hilltown residents while inhabiting one cave for themselves — the fifth cave on Groden’s map — plus one day of scouting and looting Hilltown caves for food, they chose the fourth cave on Groden’s map as the most likely one that lawmen would converge on first. It was the cave that afforded the brothers the best vantage points for seeing anyone approach and for executing an ambush.

Holing up in that fifth cave night after night was boring enough. Heading out each morning to the fourth cave to maintain a daytime vigil from isolated vantage points overlooking that cave's entrance

was stupefying. After four days of that vigil, expediency evoked a stay of vigilance. The brothers did not surveil the fourth cave at all on the day Groden and the others finally arrived; opting, instead, to remain in their own, fifth-cave abode and re-litigate the sagacity of their plan in light of the ongoing lack of lawmen to ambush. The badge-wearers' decision to wait for Dan to potentially join the hunt paid greater dividends than anticipated.

The Abottills gave up on staking out the fourth cave but they did not completely drop their guard. A brother served as a sentry above their fifth cave's entrance at all times, in rotating shifts, well hidden from anyone daring to approach. Serendipitously, Deputy Miller, farthest forward of the hunters, was beginning his covert approach to the fifth cave at the same time a shift change of sentries was in progress.

Miller was the one who led the other badge-wearers nine months earlier when Dan's wagon blocked the progress of a fleeing thief at the other side of a curve in the trail outside Haystack. Miller routinely volunteered to be spearhead. Sheriff Groden and Deputy Randolph had families. Miller did not.

Miller heard a faint sound that he suspected was from a boot scraping gravel, as when someone's step meets the ground not quite evenly and the person's momentum slides the heel forward a bit before coming to rest. Miller froze in position. The others saw Miller's reaction and emulated it.

Miller listened intently, like a sonar operator on a destroyer ship searching for a submarine. From the inconspicuous sounds, he envisioned one man walking up to an as-yet-unseen position nearby and settling in, while another man moved from there to a place farther away from Miller. He correctly deduced a changing of the guard occurred.

Miller communicated his deduction to Dan, who was designated to be in third position for each cave's approach, about ten yards back from Miller, deemed to be the position where he would least likely get shot. The badge-wearers felt an obligation to protect the civilian. An additional motivation was that, after having waited days for Dan before starting the hunt in order to avail themselves of Dan's rifle, they were not about to risk a first shot from an undetected assailant taking that rifle out of the ensuing action. Miller silently directed Dan to backtrack, sneak to highest ground, and then position himself above where Miller reckoned the sentry would be. To the other two men, Miller signaled the far easier-to-communicate directive to stay in place.

Twenty minutes later, Miller saw Dan where he was directed. Dan indicated the sighting of a target. The deputy, certain Dan's target had to be one of the brothers, alerted the other two badge-wearers to get ready to move. Miller instructed Dan to take the shot. Two explosions rang out and echoed across the hills, separated by the time it took for the Winchester's lever to chamber a second round. The sentry was ended, as was the benefit of further covertness.

Three lawmen scrambled forward quickly and took positions facing the cave entrance from behind boulders before the two brothers inside gathered their rifles and reached the cave entrance. The brothers crouched in the shadow at the edges of their cave entrance so that the lawmen, with the low sun in the western sky shining from behind the cave entrance, could not see their targets, either. It was a standoff.

Years ago, a mentor taught a young Groden to carry a small mirror. Under the right conditions and with a clear line of sight, the mirror could be used to signal someone with reflected light, clandestinely, across a large distance.

On this occasion, Groden used his mirror for a different purpose. He whispered his plan to his deputies. Miller communicated to Dan to get into a position from which he could see the cave entrance and then be ready to shoot when he would see targets there.

A little while later, Groden saw Dan was ready and put his plan into action. His two deputies opened fire toward the cave entrance and the sheriff held out his mirror and quickly angled a reflected beam onto the entrance of the cave. His arm and face were exposed and vulnerable, as were those of the deputies. The brothers opened fire in the direction of the source of the light beam but the reflected sunlight in their eyes hampered their aim. The main purpose of the beam was to illuminate the cave entrance, which it did. Four rifle shots, in quick succession, immediately rang out from higher ground. The hunt was over, with a total of three targets scored.

The four hunters spent the night in the fifth cave, eating some of the remaining provisions previously scrounged by the brothers. The next morning, Deputy Miller and Dan returned to Haystack. Dan retrieved his boarded horse and rode home forthwith to assuage the fears for his safety that Pa — and Ma, more so — expressed upon learning his plan two days earlier.

Miller took the sheriff's wagon and rode the trail back to the other two badge-wearers. They put the three dead bodies in the wagon and Sheriff Groden and Deputy Miller rode westward to collect the rewards at Wellbee — the town generously referred to as the territory's seat — a six hour wagon ride away. They expected a few days would be required to conclude their business, which presented an excuse to enjoy being guests in Wellbee.

Deputy Randolph walked back to Haystack, gathered the refugees together, and informed them they had nothing to fear anymore from the Abottills. He encouraged them to reclaim their cave homes. They implored for a full accounting, as assurance, and received it. Before heading out, they shared their relief with a few of the townsfolk. Then, like children showing off that they are privy to a secret, they shared the full accounting they learned from Randolph.

News spread quickly throughout Haystack. The same news reached Roysbrook a day later via an

itinerant fabric salesperson heading east that day.

Several members of the Roysbrook congregation went to pay their respects to Mr. Abottill, their fellow congregant, over the death of his sons. That news fell on him as if it were banishment to Hell. He implored for a full accounting and received it.

Mr. Abottill lapsed into a stupor, mourning his loss. He first blamed himself and begged forgiveness aloud, alone in his room, with his face turned upward. Then he redirected his loathing against his sons' killers. He screamed and railed how those killers dishonored his proud family heritage by hunting his sons like animals for pieces of silver. At dawn's first light, he set out to Haystack with his rifle.

Abottill entered the Haystack sheriff's office first, rifle in hand. No one was there. He stepped back outside and noticed a small group of people standing together on the wooden, boardwalk planks in front of a building a short distance away. He approached them, holding his rifle with both hands, pointed downward, a bullet already chambered, a finger on the trigger.

The gathering included Deputy Randolph and five residents, two of whom were wearing a gun belt, each with a revolver strapped in its holster. Abottill spotted Randolph's badge when he was within ten feet of the group. He stopped, pointed his rifle at Randolph, and called out.

People moved out of the way. Randolph raised his hands away from his side arms, fingers pointed upward, and began to speak. Abottill shot before any word came out. Abottill chambered another round with a pull of the rifle's lever and fired again. The two men wearing gun belts struggled to get their Colts out of their holsters and finally began shooting after Abottill put a third round in the deputy, collapsed on his knees.

Ten shots were fired by the two bystanders followed by multiple clicks of their empty guns' hammers. Fortunately for them, they heeded the advice, mentioned earlier, of only loading five bullets to prevent shooting their own feet upon grabbing their guns. Of the ten bullets they fired from only ten feet away, four hit their mark. Fortunately for them, that was adequate.

Abottill, Sr., died believing he redeemed his family's honor. Randolph died without understanding why he was killed.

The preacher at the Roysbrook church presided over a funeral for Abottill, Sr. He spoke about redemption and not understanding the ways of the Lord, along with other perfunctory words.

No one was present to hear those words. Even the grave diggers stood fifty yards away, impatiently.

The tragedy of no one attending a funeral is dwarfed by no one having truly attended the deceased's life. The grave diggers returned to finish their job while the preacher walked away mumbling to himself about Divine forgiveness and heavenly rewards.

Sheriff Groden and Deputy Miller returned to Haystack later that day, reward money in tow. It was supposed to be a celebratory moment but the first townsfolk they encountered dashed that expectation.

The two lawmen immediately went to Randolph's widow to offer condolences, apprehensive how they would be received. She could blame them for embarking on the bounty hunt that led to her husband's death. She could blame them for leaving her husband behind when they went to collect the reward.

She, her son, her daughter, and several other people were in the Randolph family home. The two badge-wearers entered, sheepishly advanced muddled words trying to commiserate with her loss, and apologetically discharged their duty in presenting the widow her husband's share of the reward money. Actually, they presented her an amount exceeding Randolph's share by one hundred dollars: fifty extra from each of Groden and Miller. They were not trying to ameliorate their guilt over anything they did wrong, only over the fact that they were alive while their colleague no longer was. She graciously accepted both their words and the money.

Her daughter, Ella, sixteen years old, taking her cue from her mother, blamed the four Abottills for the loss of the father she adored. Those four were dead. Her need for revenge ended there.

The dutiful son, Frank, inherited the burden of protecting his family. It weighed on him mercilessly. His father tried to teach him how to shoot, but each time a gun recoiled in his hand, he recoiled from guns. It was not that he lacked strength, being a strapping fellow, seventeen years old. The prospect of harming others revolted him. His father came to accept that and did not push his son in that direction anymore. With his father suddenly gone, how could he keep his mother and sister safe in a world that felt wildly dangerous?

Dan rode his wagon to Haystack three days later on a routine run. Miller communicated to him what happened. There were so few people Dan cared about and one was gone. It was the first time Dan experienced loss like that and he could not understand what he was feeling. He retreated from his emotions and went about performing the chores of his trip.

Later, as Dan was unhitching his horses to head home, Miller walked up to him and held out the $300 share of the reward money Dan earned. Dan stared at the money in Miller's hand. Those same incomprehensible feelings returned. After several seconds, he looked into Miller's eyes, nodded barely, took the money, and shakily climbed into his wagon.

That evening, after dinner at the Tendle home, Dan and his parents communicated with each other for hours. The experience brought them closer even as it disheartened his parents regarding their son's future.

There was an opening for a salaried position in Haystack. No one there was remotely interested in becoming a deputy, especially after recent events. Law enforcement in that part of the world and at that time was not generally viewed as a long term career. The youngest Abottill was correct in presuming that, had the Abottills killed Haystack's lawmen, Haystack's citizens would have been faced with the prospect of being without law enforcement for an indefinite period of time.

Dan returned the next day accompanied by his parents. Ma and Pa Tendle went to pay their respects to widow Randolph and her children. Mrs. Randolph warmly received the Tendles into her home and the five people of the two families visited together for a mutually gratifying two hours.

During the course of that visit, Ma tentatively asked whether the Randolphs were going to remain in Haystack. The widow admitted she tried a few times to think about the future but had not been able to stay focused on that decision yet. Encouraged by the nonjudgmental sincerity of the Tendles, the three Randolphs then tentatively dipped into that necessary, family discussion.

The widow mused wistfully about buying a small farm with her husband's share of the reward money. She disclosed she was a farmer's daughter, herself, born and raised on a farm. She felt out of place in Haystack when her husband took the position as deputy there. The son and daughter added moral support, allowing that living and working on a farm would be appealing, though the son shyly worried aloud how they could be safe without law enforcers nearby.

Dan did not go to the Randolph home with Ma and Pa because he did not wish to regenerate those emotions of loss he did not understand and did not think he could communicate appropriately with the Randolph family members, whom he never met. Miller found Dan by himself near the family’s wagon. The deputy held out Randolph's badge and painted a gentle invitation.

Dan stared at the badge for a while. He communicated he was needed at home to help his parents with the farm. He stared at the badge a while longer before looking into Miller's face. Miller nodded to signify he understood. The deputy put his arm around Dan's shoulders and invited him into the sheriff's office. There, they brought the sheriff into a conversation with them, wherein Miller acted as interpreter.

Eventually, Miller suggested the three of them walk to the Randolph home because Ma and Pa were still there and it was getting late for the trip back to the Tendle farm. Miller also urged Dan to pay his

respects there and reassured him that the two remaining badge-wearers would be on either side of him when he did. Dan acquiesced.

It was an awkward moment — several moments, actually — as Dan tried to render the culturally endorsed ritual of condolences as best he could and despite sorrow renewing its assault on him. Widow Randolph smiled warmly. Dan slowly turned his face toward hers. She extended her right hand. He looked at her hand, then her face again, then placed his right hand in hers.

Ma and Pa saw for the first time how much Dan changed. He had friends and mentors standing on either side of him. He was able to look others in the eyes. His parents realized how valuable were Dan's visits in Haystack and the way he was treated there. Truth be known, they suffered a tinge of envy at how others helped their son beyond what they achieved with him. Regardless, their dominant feelings were joyful. They allowed themselves optimism over Dan's future after they would be gone. Still, their concern remained as to whether their gunslinger son would outlive them at all.

That concern, already piqued due to the cause for their visit to the Randolph home that day, expanded when, soon thereafter, Mrs. Randolph asked Sheriff Groden if he had any prospects for a new deputy. The sheriff stated he asked Miller to approach Dan about that. Miller added verbally and simultaneously gestured that Dan seemed interested but decided to turn down the offer because he was needed on the Tendle farm.

Ma and Pa looked at their son. He nodded to signify concurrence with what they were told, though his demeanor contested his own decision. The parents looked at each other. Two pairs of eyes commiserated over being torn apart inside. This was what Dan wanted, yet this would put him in even greater danger. Dan was blooming in Haystack the way he never did or would at home. Surely they could manage the farm without him.

The epiphany hit them concurrently and they saw it in each other's faces. Pa tipped his head slightly toward his wife, inviting her to speak it. Ma turned to the Randolphs and asked them to move into their home on their farm. She explained that the son would take Dan's room and the two Randolph ladies would take a spare room the Tendles barely used. Together, they would share the chores, the bounty of the farm, and profits of the farm. Pa, looking at the Randolph son, added that the farm is hidden from the trail and he was a pretty good shooter in case of trouble.

Mrs. Randolph recognized the symbiosis, too. The proposal lit up her children's faces. Miller apprised Dan of his parents' offer and its implication for him. It was the natural solution for overcoming all obstacles in a single stroke.

The lives of six individuals whiplashed in that instant. There would be major adjustments for

everyone in the near future. Sorting through those consequences was allayed until later.

The Tendles invited Sheriff Groden and Deputy Miller into the exclusive fellowship of those who knew the location of the farm, which enabled two more men to help Dan, Ma, Pa and the Randolphs execute the relocations. Pa stressed to new inductees of the fellowship that guarding the farm's location was in everyone's best interest, and instructed them on avoiding routinely using the same route between the farm and the main trail.

Pa spoke privately with Miller and Groden, informing them how and why the people of Roysbrook turned against the Tendles. The welcome Pa and Dan received when they first went to Haystack had forestalled Pa’s anticipated telling of his side of the Roysbrook stories. Pa convinced himself he finally had a strictly rational motivation for divulging the tale because the Haystack lawmen, including Dan, might be called upon to assist Sheriff Coren in Roysbrook. Pa did not acknowledge to himself his festering, emotional motivation to vent about that chronicle. Neither Ma nor Pa shared that history with the Randolphs at that time.

Dan, an official deputy, took up residence in one of the boarding houses. His salary covered his usual expenses, with a little to spare.

Soon thereafter, he borrowed a wagon and rode back to his former target practice range and, authorized via Pa's permission, retrieved the gunslinger target with the twitch-able limbs. He added this to the simpler targets in the secluded spot, about a mile from Haystack, where the Haystack lawmen conducted their periodic practice sessions.

Groden and Miller were impressed with the gunslinger target and far more impressed to finally witness Dan's speed and accuracy drawing against barely a twitch. They heard about his mastery from scuttlebutt out of Roysbrook but expected the hearsay was exaggerated, as hearsay often is. They concluded: not this time.

Brief Visits

Late morning, five months later, a Haystack resident alerted Sheriff Groden that a stranger wearing a gun belt arrived in town. Groden deployed his stranger-sitting tactic.

Strangers generally frequented saloons to slake one or more of their needs/desires. Stranger-sitting, therefore, most often took place in a saloon. As described previously, stranger-sitting began with the lawmen entering the saloon, bearing their rifles, and surrounding the stranger or strangers at a short distance away. Then Sheriff Groden would inquire about the strangers' intentions and the purpose of their visit.

Previously, Dan only came to Haystack once per week or so, on average, and missed out on the handful of stranger-sittings that occurred since he began his trips there. This was going to be Dan's first experience with the process.

Groden pointed to Dan's rifle, waved his finger, pointed to Dan's holsters, and nodded. He reasoned that Dan would be faster with his Colts if the need arose. Dan understood and unbuckled his holsters. As the three lawmen walked to the saloon, Miller gave Dan a refresher course on stranger-sitting.

Dan wore a recently purchased vest for the first time that day. The vest covered the badge because he forgot to move his badge from his shirt to the vest when he put it on. One of the other lawmen should have noticed the oversight, except they were distracted by the stranger-sitting assignment. Consequently, the stranger presumed Dan was some kid pretending to be a man, likely the sheriff's son.

He stared sternly at Dan as the three lawmen took up positions around the stranger. He considered lunging toward Dan for the pleasure of seeing the youngster react like a frightened child. The two badge-wearers stared at him, their rifles pointed toward the floor. They each overtly flipped their rifle levers to chamber a round. The stranger decided they would shoot him and claim self defense if he carried out his delicious ruse against Dan.

Subjects of stranger-sitting might avow with insincere jocularity their innocent intentions, or whine about being harassed and treated unfairly, or grumble inaudibly, or silently stare intensely trying to intimidate, or some combination thereof. In any event, no stranger thusly targeted under Groden's watch ever drew his gun or stayed long without convincing the sheriff he was not a threat.

The stranger finished his drink, slammed the empty glass on the table with an obnoxious thud, stared at Dan, and snorted a face-saving profanity to rehabilitate his self-image. Dan heard none of that, of

course, and did not react at all, focused strictly on being ready for this potential target going for his gun. The surrounded man stood up slowly, walked out with a lawmen escort, mounted his horse, and rode toward the east. Once more, stranger-sitting produced the intended outcome. His visit in Haystack was brief and uneventful.

Groden indicated his evaluation of Dan's performance with a hand on the young man’s shoulder and a warm smile. Then he noticed an edge of Dan’s badge flash from under Dan's vest and pointed to it, still smiling and with a chuckle. An embarrassed Dan immediately corrected his oversight.

That stranger's name was Kendor. Five years earlier, convicted of armed robbery, he was sentenced to ten years in the territorial penitentiary, located in Wellbee. That robbery occurred in Roysbrook. It was Sheriff Coren of Roysbrook who apprehended him. Kendor only intended to stop briefly in Haystack, anyway. He was en route to Roysbrook to settle that score with Sheriff Coren.

A month prior, the parole board convened in Wellbee for their regularly scheduled, monthly meeting and voted — via secret ballot, as always — to parole Kendor. Those who would be most likely in danger from the release of a convicted criminal would have no reason to enact appropriate precautions against peril from that prisoner while that prisoner was incarcerated. Therefore, standard practice before early release of a convicted criminal was to alert via letters any person to whom the parolee would likely pose a threat.

One might question the morality of a criminal justice system that allows ending incarceration of a convict who is still deemed a likely threat to law-abiding citizens. The system could have added to standard sentencing practice the stipulation that the convict not be released back into society until no longer posing a significant threat. On the other hand, there was no reason to expect that a subjective determination of lingering threat would be any more accurate than subjective determination of earned parole. That equivalence seems to further impeach the sagacity of granting parole.

At their subsequent meeting, the parole board would confirm needed alerts were mailed and vote a second time in case anything happened during the prior month to induce a change of mind. The second vote regarding Kendor was the same. He was granted parole and released at noon the next day.

A prisoner released from the penitentiary received fifty dollars from tax revenues. The reasoning was that such a sum would allow the former prisoner to start over as a law abiding, productive member of society. Otherwise, penniless, the former prisoner would be more likely to revert to criminal activity.

Kendor invested his fifty dollars and doubled the investment quickly. He stopped in a local store and bought a few essential supplies, new clothing, a Colt six-shooter, ammunition, and a gun belt. He

walked to a nearby stable and arranged to purchase a good horse with saddle, saying he would return shortly with payment. He went back to the store, bashed in the shopkeeper's head, stashed him in the back room, then stole the money in the cash box – almost a hundred dollars. He nonchalantly walked to the stable where he completed that transaction, rode out of town toward Haystack, and hid in Hilltown for a brief visit overnight.

Around 2 p.m., a customer entered the store and was perplexed upon finding it unattended. Calling out loudly met with silence. Hesitantly looking in the back revealed the dead shopkeeper.

Wellbee badge-wearers found no one who could provide any clue and there was no resident with a plausible motive. Quickly, suspicion coalesced entirely on Kendor.

The stable owner did not come forth with information regarding selling a horse that morning, or even admit it upon being questioned, because he chose not to believe there was any connection. More importantly, if there had been a connection, he was not willing to become a scapegoat for enabling the flight of the shopkeeper's murderer. Wellbee lawmen imagined Kendor stole a horse somewhere and road out of town.

Posses were recruited to search in all plausible directions. With lack of certainty over whom they were searching for and it being late afternoon already, the posses only managed to cover short distances before giving up and returning home. No posse made it to Hilltown. Presuming Kendor would immediately flee the territory to avoid capture, there did not seem to be adequate justification for resuming the search the next day.

Kendor rode from Hilltown to Haystack the subsequent morning for that previously described, brief visit before pushing on to Roysbrook. Along the route to Roysbrook, Kendor stopped in a secluded place to practice his gunfighting skills. Although he easily out-dueled trees and boulders, it was obvious his incarceration took a toll on his speed and accuracy.

It was almost two years since Sheriff Coren tried but failed to convince the people of Roysbrook that Dan was blameless for the murder of William. His appeals were useless, even with his own daughter, Nora. She lost her betrothed when the murderers, seeking revenge, mistook William for Dan.

Being one of the few, unattached, young women in Roysbrook, a suitor replaced William as soon as it seemed fitting. That suitor was Lee, whose father owned the prosperous Brankle Ranch just outside Roysbrook. Nora became Mrs. Lee Brankle.

Analogous to how Nora chose to blame Dan for the death of William, she could have chosen to credit Dan with her step up from William, the son of a reasonably profitable shopkeeper, to Lee, the heir of a more profitable rancher. Irrespective of that parity, Nora maintained a venomous grudge against Dan and daydreamed occasionally of exacting revenge.

Another revenge motive infiltrated Roysbrook when Kendor arrived. Kendor looked differently than he had five years earlier. His hair was longer and unkempt back then, he had a full and scraggly beard, and he wore a disintegrating hat and clothes with his one revolver tucked out of sight; all for the purpose of appearing like some drunkard incapable of pulling off an armed robbery. This day, he was clean shaven, bald, and dressed like the quintessential gunslinger. Sheriff Coren, whose interaction with Kendor five years earlier was fleeting, and whose recollection of Kendor faded, did not recognize Kendor when summoned to the saloon by locals.

Stranger-sitting worked well in Haystack with three lawmen employing the tactic. It would be less effective with only one, Coren, by himself. Instead, Coren relied on the tactic of engaging strangers in friendly conversation, trying to discern their intentions. In the case of the two strangers who wound up killing the local card sharp and were then shot down by Dan while they fled, Sheriff Coren's ability to discern intentions fell short. With the three others Dan shot, the sheriff's approach failed miserably. With Kendor, the sheriff convinced himself his approach worked marvelously well.

In contrast to his behavior in Haystack, Kendor in Roysbrook was personable, jovial, entertaining, even charismatic. He captivated the room and Sheriff Coren with fictitious stories featuring himself — using an alias, of course — coming to the rescue of innocent, victimized people elsewhere, while mostly suppressing his proclivity for profanity. By the time evening fell, he ingratiated himself with the sheriff and patrons, all of whom encouraged him to stay in Roysbrook. He assented to give that invitation full consideration.

Kendor rented a room and, over the next two days, made himself the talk of the town as the person whose company everyone sought. He attended church the third day, Sunday, to the delight of the congregants. Nora and Lee were perplexed when Nora's father skipped that service, uncharacteristically and unexpectedly.

Following church services, a couple walking home found Sheriff Coren dead in an alley with a knife wound in his back. Kendor was quickly on the scene after the woman screamed her alarm. As the crowd gathered, people were touched by the grief Kendor displayed over the man he honored affectionately for welcoming him to town and treating him warmly.

Red hair topped a black dress again. When Nora mourned the loss of her previous fiancee, she decided to blame Dan. Nora mourned the loss of her father but with no one to blame. Neither the knife

nor any other relevant clue was discovered. That deprivation made this loss worse for her. Loss demanded vengeance and vengeance demanded a target.

At the funeral service, Kendor volunteered to add to the eulogizing remarks. Twice during his moving words he paused to avoid the embarrassment of shedding unmanly tears. Before Sheriff Coren apprehended him five years earlier, Kendor deflected any inkling of his villainous intentions by appearing to be a harmless wanderer. He mollified those present on this day by appearing to be a sincere mourner. The man had talent.

Roysbrook needed a new sheriff. A small group of residents approached Kendor when the funeral service ended and tendered the badge. Following much cajoling, “Caesar accepted the crown.”

The Abottill brothers might have felt vindicated by the similar scheme Kendor pulled off, had all three of them not been dead by then.

Those who devised the approach of gifting fifty dollars to inmates released from the penitentiary in Wellbee might have also felt vindicated by how that money enabled Kendor to become a productive member of society; that is, had they known Kendor was the new sheriff in Roysbrook. Although, to feel vindicated, they would have needed to overlook Kendor's new crimes in Wellbee and in Roysbrook between being released on parole and becoming sheriff in Roysbrook.

A prominent resident of Wellbee chose not to allow the parole board to overlook the first of those two murders, being the only murder as yet allegedly attributed to Kendor. That resident owned and was editor of the one newspaper in the territory. It was published twice monthly and the first edition subsequent to Kendor's release indicted Kendor for the robbery and murder of the shopkeeper, albeit based only on there being no other plausible suspect. The front page chronicled how Kendor was paroled early, adding relevant background of the crime for which Kendor was convicted and noting that Sheriff Coren of Roysbrook was the lawman who apprehended Kendor.

The newspaper quoted the president of the parole board — responding to a reporter’s question — stating Sheriff Coren was notified a month in advance of Kendor's release. The board president and the other four members of that parole board believed that assertion to be true. The president tasked the one employee of the parole board to do so. In light of recent events, he checked with that employee who reassured him anew that task was accomplished. The employee knew that task fell through the cracks but was unwilling to own his blunder. He feared becoming a scapegoat if Sheriff Coren met with any harm.

Citing the legal obligation not to disclose to the public results of parole board ballots, other than

whether a request for parole was granted, the president chose not to answer the reporter's question as to which of the members voted for early release of Kendor. Two of the members of the board voted against parole. That same legal obligation precluded purging themselves from the board's shared guilt adjudged by those who read/heard the Kendor-related articles in the newspaper.

The publisher included in his newspaper a sketch made of Kendor when he was on trial. No sketch was created of Kendor after he drastically changed his appearance while incarcerated. Instead, the article included a description of Kendor in words quoted from the penitentiary warden. The most important of those words described the scar on his back at his right shoulder blade.

The newspaper was only sold in Wellbee. Because Wellbee customers wanted to read about the entire territory, reporters from the newspaper were assigned beats outside of Wellbee to collect news deemed worth printing. One reporter's beat was the territory's countryside east of Wellbee. His circuit was roughly rectangular, beginning with Haystack and Roysbrook, then south along a second trail to another town, then west along a trail parallel to the first through two more towns, and finally returning home northward on the last trail segment of his beat. The three towns along the parallel, southern trail were generally separated by a roughly four-hour ride on horseback or somewhat longer by wagon. There were a few north-south paths connecting the two east-west, parallel trails; but they were rarely used, if at all, because the trails were the fastest, easiest, and safest to traverse.

The reporter's circuit included a one-night stay in each town on the loop. He deposited a few, free copies of the latest edition of the newspaper in each town, including one at each local sheriff's office. In return, locals spoke to him, likewise for free and freely, dishing out gossip and all manner of goings-on since the prior time the reporter came by.

Sheriff Groden always read the newspaper before the reporter left to continue on his loop in case anything the sheriff read there evoked a question or comment he wished to share with the reporter. On this occasion, he told the reporter that a man matching the warden's description of Kendor visited briefly in Haystack before continuing eastward. The sheriff did not mention his strategy of stranger-sitting, preferring as few people as feasible privy to that. Long ago, he appealed to his fellow residents of Haystack not to speak to any outsider about stranger-sitting because the tactic would become less effective if it were widely advertised, to the detriment of all residents. Convinced of the risk to their own best interests if they leaked the secret, they complied.

As soon as the reporter arrived next in Roysbrook, residents rushed to him and excitedly recounted the recent news about the mysterious murder of former Sheriff Coren and the fortuitous arrival of the man who, nine days earlier, accepted the job as their new sheriff. The suspicious reporter asked for and received a description of the town's new sheriff. The reporter hid any reaction as best he could.

Typically, the reporter would prioritize seeking out such a newsworthy person for an interview. Townsfolk were shocked when the reporter suddenly declared he needed to leave immediately to get this urgent news back to his employer. He did not leave any copies of the most recent newspaper before heading west toward Haystack.

Witnesses pondered these abnormalities among themselves. Kendor stepped out of his boarding house on his way to the sheriff's office, noticed the group down the road, and approached them. Before he could ask, his compatriots told him what the reporter did and did not do. Kendor deduced no newspaper was left behind because it contained an article about him, likely with his description. The logical conclusion was that the reporter was hightailing it back to Wellbee to divulge Kendor's location.

These insane schemes by criminals to hide from the law by becoming lawmen contained this predictable, fatal flaw that someone would eventually realize who they were and would expose them. But then, if criminals had allowed themselves to peruse the risks in their schemes, they would have been less likely to become criminals. The propensity for willful ignorance is part of human nature.

The reporter returned to Haystack in the early evening with both he and his horse exhausted from cramming two normally easy, day trips into a single day. He found Sheriff Groden in his home, imparted the news regarding Sheriff Coren's demise, and alerted him that the description he heard of the new sheriff in Roysbrook resembled that of Kendor. Groden gathered Miller and Dan into his office and had the reporter apprise his deputies of the same information, with Miller providing the ongoing translation for Dan.

They strongly suspected Kendor killed Sheriff Coren for revenge. Groden reminded his deputies there was no evidence yet to support that suspicion. However, Kendor was a wanted man for the alleged crimes he committed in Wellbee after being paroled, as documented in the newspaper. The Haystack badge-wearers could remain in Haystack and let the law enforcement officials from Wellbee pursue the lead. It would take a day for the reporter to return to Wellbee and notify law enforcement officials there plus two more days for law enforcers to get to Roysbrook, since they would not want to arrive there after dark and exhausted. One or more Haystack lawmen could be in Roysbrook the next day, at least two days sooner than Wellbee lawmen. If the new Roysbrook sheriff was Kendor, time was of the essence because he might learn he needed to flee at any moment; maybe he already had. The Haystack badge-wearers decided they had an obligation to follow up on this credible lead themselves.

They agreed it would be foolhardy for only one of them to pursue what might be a murderer. Groden declared two of them should go and one should stay in Haystack, the protection of which was their top priority. Miller reminded Groden all badge-wearers together pursued the lead on the Abottill brothers in Hilltown. Groden defended his decision by noting the distinction that the Abottill lead was better substantiated and there were three brothers, rather than one suspect.

But who should remain behind? With their knowledge of Dan's mistreatment by the people of Roysbrook, the sheriff and deputy were both leaning toward leaving Dan in Haystack. Simultaneously, they were both leaning away from Dan being without Miller, his link to the world of people, especially so soon after assuming the authority and duties of deputy. Deputy Randolph was left behind in Haystack when Groden and Miller went to Wellbee to collect the reward for the Abottills and Groden was forevermore guilt-ridden over that decision. Groden and Miller still felt obliged to protect Dan as if he were a civilian, dreading having to inform and offer condolences to the Tendles. Unfortunately, both options incurred added risk to Dan. Finally, Groden mustered logic, his emotions retreated, and he decided he would remain in Haystack and the two deputies would go to Roysbrook. With dawn the next morning, the reporter left Haystack westbound, en route to Wellbee. Miller and Dan left Haystack eastbound, en route to Roysbrook.

Soon thereafter, a resident of Roysbrook discovered Kendor's rented room was empty, his horse was gone, and the sheriff's office was raided of ammunition. Kendor had slipped out of town an hour before dawn that same morning. Rather than flee the territory, he intended to intercept the reporter. Yet again, he was guilty of oversight, namely: even if he succeeded, the disappearance of the reporter would only delay awareness of his deception.

By dawn's light, Kendor's brain cleared enough for him to realize he would not even be able to overtake the reporter before the reporter reached Haystack. After his experience with Groden's practice of stranger-sitting, he had no wish to tangle with those Haystack badge-wearers. He anticipated a posse out of Haystack would be heading toward him already. Unlike Sheriff Groden, he overestimated the abilities and willingness of Haystack citizens to be useful members of a posse. Kendor decided his previous decision was a bad one and turned to the south at the next path he spied.

Deputies Miller and Tendle reached the hills that hid the Tendle farm from view. Miller proposed detouring southward to check on the farm's inhabitants and alert them to recent events, suspicions, and concerns. They weighed that objective against the potential of such a detour encumbering their mission if it were to allow more time for Kendor to potentially flee. Miller gestured that Pa would likely be able to handle any stranger who approached the farm. Dan recalled that he alone detected and stopped the invasion of the farm while his parents were doing chores — a recollection none of the Tendles shared with anyone else. Dan continued to keep that event concealed. The two lawmen pressed on toward Roysbrook while Dan consoled himself with the rationalization that the three recently added inhabitants of the farm made an undetected approach of a stranger less likely than before.

About fifteen minutes later, while always riding at a measured pace on this journey to avoid tiring their horses too early, Miller spotted a profusion of horseshoe prints ahead of them on the trail at a perpendicular fork with a path. There were groupings of sagebrush on either side of the entrance to the southern leg of that path. The pattern of prints suggested a rider came from the east, paused there, turned the horse sharply, necessitating the horse taking multiple steps as it pivoted tightly, and proceeded southward between the bushes and onto that path. Prints were no longer visible beyond there

because the path was minimally worn.

Miller asked Dan whether he was familiar with that path, or at least where it went. Dan saw the path every time he used to travel to Roysbrook but never explored it. He added that no path led to the farm other than the gap between the two hills that hid the farm from the trail. Miller worried that someone traveling on that unexplored path might be able to see the Tendle farm, or maybe see smoke from a cooking fire at the farm. Dan asserted that no one ever approached the farm from any direction other than from between the two hills. Having never explored that path, he could not state whether the farm was detectable from it. Nor could he know whether serendipity and/or disinterest deserved the credit for no one who might have traveled that path ever having detoured to the farm.

The two deputies could have followed the path while watching for both the rider who made those prints and for any hint of the farm's existence. Or else they could have backtracked hastily and gone to the farm via the standard route, in case the rider was Kendor and he might have detected the farm from that southbound path. Or else they could have discounted the hoof prints as being irrelevant to Kendor's whereabouts and continued toward Roysbrook. Dan deferred to the more experienced of the two deputies to decide, who wished he could defer to the even more experienced sheriff back in Haystack.

Miller wrestled with a puzzle of “perhapses.” The reporter said he truncated his usual circuit upon learning of recent events in Roysbrook and returned to Haystack. Perhaps the locals in Roysbrook informed Kendor of that fact. If so, perhaps that fact then informed Kendor he needed to flee. Perhaps locals informed Kendor what the reporter's usual circuit was. If so, Kendor knew the people on the southern portion of the reporter’s circuit would not yet be aware of who he was and what he did, so perhaps he fled southward. How would he have known about this path? Perhaps Kendor spotted this path when he rode to Roysbrook after Haystack's stranger-sitting persuaded him to leave. But why would he have taken this path southward instead of the trail the newspaper reporter, et al., used routinely? It was highly unlikely Kendor would come in contact with anyone on this path, but highly likely he would come across others along the southbound trail out of Roysbrook. Perhaps he used this path to avoid witnesses/clues as to his whereabouts. If Kendor took this path to avoid witnesses, perhaps he would avoid going to the Tendle farm even if he detected it. But perhaps Kendor was still in Roysbrook. If so, if Miller with Dan went off on this path while Kendor got away, Miller would be responsible for failing to carry out his mission based only on a concatenation of “perhapses.” Finally, Miller decided they would continue to Roysbrook.

Just before reaching town, they detoured a few yards from the trail and hitched their horses to a tree surrounded by lush grass at the brook’s bank for the horses to graze on. They each took their rifles and walked back to the trail. Miller ordered Dan to remain behind at a vantage point from which he could watch their horses and see the trail into Roysbrook while Miller would scout ahead. Dan was uneasy not being in a better position to support his fellow deputy but relieved not being in Roysbrook.

Miller stashed his badge, casually walked into town, and entered the first store. There he learned the news that the new sheriff was missing, unseen since the previous night, and the sheriff's office was robbed that previous night. Everyone in town was worried the new sheriff was killed like the old sheriff was, but no one found the body yet. The shopkeeper said the town feared a murderer was on the loose in their town. A bit of questioning further laid bare that the new sheriff was aware of the unusual nature of the reporter's brief, most recent visit. Townsfolk in Roysbrook kept abreast of all the gossip regarding Roysbrook.

Miller concluded the new sheriff was certainly Kendor and Miller's mission failed before he and Dan left Haystack that morning. There was no justification for continuing to look for Kendor without any information from Roysbrook as to his whereabouts, intentions, or even the direction he fled.

Miller exited the store, pinned his badge on, signaled Dan that Kendor was gone, and instructed Dan to return to their horses. Miller recalled Pa's tale about how Roysbrook people turned on the Tendles and was not about to incur any repercussions. He walked into the center of town, called out loudly, identified himself, and requested people assemble around him. He summarized recent events for them and left a copy of the newspaper edition the reporter chose not to leave there the prior day.

Neither Miller nor Dan had any desire to linger in Roysbrook, so Miller walked back out of town and they departed together immediately. Thus ended another brief visit.

They could have made it back to Haystack by evening, as the reporter did the day before. Both wished to reassure themselves regarding the safety of the people at the Tendle farm. They concurred they would rest at the farm overnight.

The farmers recognized Miller's voice from his loud, friendly salutation. That brought Ma, Pa, Mrs. Randolph, and both her children scampering happily out front. The sight of the six of them was instantly comforting to the two riders. In contrast, upon seeing Dan on horseback with Miller, the farmers' faces mutated from pleased to inquisitive to apprehensive.

Since becoming a resident of Haystack, Dan rented a wagon in Haystack roughly once per week, purchased items on any list his parents and Randolphs gave him the week before, ferried the purchases to the Tendle farm, ferried farm production back to Haystack to sell to local stores, and returned the wagon before evening. Dan did not come to the farm unexpectedly or without the wagon. The sight of the two badge-wearers approaching, both on horseback, induced that described apprehension on the faces observing their approach.

Surveying the foreboding visages, Miller comforted the farmers, assuring them everything was

alright. His assertion was not entirely correct, but more detail could wait — no need to spoil everyone's dinner.

Pa, with help from the others, had built a second table for the dining area in the house to better accommodate the extended family and potential guests. Everyone was in good spirits while sharing a meal that evening and the farmers were excited to recount stories for Miller's benefit demonstrating how well they were all enjoying their arrangement.

After dinner, Miller requested that cleaning up be postponed. He proffered the second copy of the latest newspaper edition he brought. The evening's entertainment consisted of taking turns reading Kendor-related articles aloud, followed by Miller adding the update verbally as the dénouement. Miller previously apprised Dan of the gist of the articles during breaks while riding together that morning so there was no need to keep Dan in the conversation. Nevertheless, Ella Randolph used the opportunity to continue practicing the gestures Ma and Pa had been teaching her, at her request. She could not always keep up with the recital from the newspaper, but performed well enough to earn Dan's praise and encouragement, as usual.

It was too soon after former Deputy Randolph's demise for anyone to not relive that anguish upon hearing about Sheriff Coren's demise. Frank Randolph's fears over his inability to protect himself and his family rebounded vigorously. The man alleged to be Kendor could be anywhere, both then and in the future.

Frank was not able to embrace gun training when it was offered by his father. Given the current circumstances, he stated he wanted to try again. Frank asked his mother for permission to request gun training from Pa. She told him she would sleep on it. Neither mother nor son slept well that night. He was terrorized by a nightmare of being unarmed and facing a killer. She was terrorized by a nightmare of her son being armed and facing a killer.

Miller took Pa aside, by themselves, and asked about the path fifteen minutes to the east. He intentionally neglected to mention the hoof prints he spotted there. Pa said he explored that path when he and Ma first looked for someplace to stake a homestead claim. He recalled that the southbound leg of that path descended into a narrow, wooded gully and followed a shallow stream for several miles; after which it crossed the stream and eventually ascended to intersect the east-west trail connecting the towns to the south. He doubted the path was used other than by animals. In response to Miller's follow-up query, Pa was confident no one could detect the farm or approach the farm from that path. There was a line of hills with prickly vegetation paralleling that stream, separating the gully from the farm. Miller was evasive when Pa then asked about the motivation for this line of questioning. He merely urged Pa to be more vigilant than usual, at least until it was determined Kendor was gone, apprehended, or dead.

Later that night, Dan communicated to Pa regarding the hoof prints. Dan was not privy to Miller's evasiveness on the subject. Pa did not speak of the hoof prints to anyone else.

The next morning, the deputies ended their brief visit to the Tendle farm and rode on to Haystack, arriving around noon. Three Haystack badge-wearers ate lunch together, during which Miller recounted all he saw, heard, and did. He and Sheriff Groden reviewed the decisions Miller made with their justifications. Miller concealed how proud he felt when his boss approved of all his decisions with hindsight.

In the late afternoon, three lawmen from Wellbee arrived in Haystack intending to spend the night before pressing on to Roysbrook the subsequent day. The last meal of that day was shared by both contingents of badge-wearers reviewing the same material from Miller. Left unmentioned during this recounting were both the source of intelligence regarding the path into the gully and the existence/ location of the Tendle farm.

The men from Wellbee explained that, following the return of the reporter the night before, six lawmen were concurrently dispatched from Wellbee that morning. The other threesome took the southern trail in case Kendor tried to flee toward those towns. The two posses were executing a pincer-like search pattern along the trails of the reporter's circuit.

Armed with Miller's scouting report, including the hoof prints at the path into the gully, the Wellbee leader decided his threesome would first go to Roysbrook the next day to seek any updates regarding Kendor. The results of the foray by Miller and Dan mitigated urgency along the northern trail of the search, so he decided they would spend that subsequent night in Roysbrook. They would then split up. He would travel by himself south along the main trail to eventually meet and share intelligence with the threesome searching along the southern trail, while his two partners would backtrack and take the path southward to search the gully. He suspected such a secluded area might provide an attractive hideout for a fugitive waiting for anticipated searchers to retire from their pursuit. Due diligence required closing out that possibility. He thanked his guests for having made an early attempt at apprehension and for the valuable information that effort yielded, but made no request of them to offer any further assistance; which suited the three Haystack lawmen.

The youngest of that Wellbee threesome, Henry, recently arrived in Wellbee. He was generally brash; although, taciturn regarding his past whereabouts or actions. Absent justification, such as self defense, firing a gun in Wellbee city center was prohibited. Henry routinely went to a spot just outside city limits — still within sight of residents — and practiced drawing and shooting. It was intimidating to other locals, which was part of the intended purpose.

The obligation to pursue Kendor presented a dilemma for the sheriff in Wellbee analogous to that

faced by Groden earlier. The Wellbee sheriff chose to stay behind with one of his five deputies but wanted to have three men in each arm of the search. He had to recruit two locals overnight, temporarily deputize them, and assign one to each of the two posses. The Wellbee sheriff was reluctant to accept Henry's offer to join the search but was only able to recruit one other local who was both willing and able. He deemed including Henry in one posse with his two best deputies was preferred over sending only two men to search along one of the trails.

During initial introductions before the six badge-wearers sat down for dinner in Haystack, Dan was introduced as being deaf. Between dinner forkfuls, Henry kept looking askance at Dan, who avoided eye contact with the Wellbee deputies — still standard practice for Dan toward people with whom he did not feel comfortable. After the last bite, Henry finally sneered at Dan and declared derisively that something else was wrong with "that boy." His supervisor admonished him immediately. Neither Groden nor Miller made more of it because, clearly, Dan was impervious to the insult.

Except Dan was not. Despite having never learned English or any verbal language, thereby disqualifying potential lipreading — a skill of far less value than often depicted — Dan's peripheral vision perceived demeanor and facial expressions, which he intuitively interpreted with a proficiency of which no one was aware.

Dan did not react overtly to Henry's insulting condescension, but he resented being treated with disdain and seethed internally. Dan's successes with his guns plus the reverence he received in Haystack instilled self-esteem. Dan enjoyed being respected, in contrast to Henry enjoying being feared. Although, when one is respected for the ability to kill, the distinction between respected and feared blurs. Henry's insult was neither forgiven nor forgotten.

Next morning, the three lawmen from Wellbee ended their brief visit in Haystack and headed east. Nothing new regarding Kendor was available when the Wellbee deputies arrived in Roysbrook. The subsequent morning they split up as planned.

Henry and his minder returned to the sagebrush-bordered path entrance, which the threesome recognized from Miller's description as they traveled from Haystack the prior day. The pair rode the path southward until in sight of the gully. They hitched their horses and proceeded stealthily on foot, one on either side of the gully. They both froze in position when they heard a distant sound of iron horseshoes scuffling on loose pebbles. Miller said that path was rarely trod, if ever. They each deduced, separately, Kendor was holed up in the gully and was leading his horse to the stream to drink.

Henry stepped out into the open, called Kendor by name, impugned Kendor's manhood, and challenged him to a duel. The other deputy was flummoxed and remained motionless and hidden while Henry walked forward slowly, augmenting his initial words with a rancorous monologue. Henry had a

history with Kendor and relied on it to trigger the reaction Henry wanted.

Kendor stepped into the center of the gully. Henry said nothing more once Kendor appeared; merely smiling, instead. The two gunmen walked slowly toward each other. It was Kendor's turn to engage in a monologue. He hurled unceasing profanities against his adversary. The taboo-derived shock value of profanity is needed to release emotional stress or to stress emotional needs. The efficacy of both those abilities decays with overuse.

Henry was successful in dueling on more than one occasion during his buried life. Very little energizes pursuit of success as surely as prior success. Henry's confidence tolerated no bounds and he savored the adrenaline rush of a duel. Accepting risk for a noble purpose is heroism. That same act devoid of such purpose is stupidity.

While incarcerated for five years, Kendor was not permitted to touch a gun, naturally, and he had little time and opportunity to practice since then. He was not nearly as fast and accurate as he was when he and Henry were mutually acquainted during Henry's buried life. That fact did not enter Henry's mind as the two gunslingers continued to approach each other. Henry's confidence had no need for a boost from such awareness and his ego rejected the existence of any condition which might mitigate his pending glory.

Conversely, that fact weighed heavily on Kendor's mind and confidence. Still, as with other social animals, an alpha male must either stand his ground against an upstart or else slink away. Kendor was inclined not to run cowardly from a one-on-one duel. Seeing no one else there, he realized he could continue avoiding being discovered if and only if he prevailed in this duel.

The position of the sun in the sky was immaterial, being almost directly overhead. The separation between duelists shrank to where an accurate first shot from the hip was becoming plausible. Neither spoke from that point on as each continued slowly moving forward. It was time to concentrate and devise strategy.

Henry chose to keep approaching until Kendor would stop and then to let his adversary begin to draw first. He wanted his hidden compatriot to witness true valor. This strategy was detrimental to his best interests, but he was certain he would win, all the same.

Kendor feared his opponent would stop approaching upon reaching the distance at which Henry could accurately fire his first shot from the hip, a distance that would be greater than Kendor's diminished, accurate range. He did not want to continue approaching a stationary Henry, thereby affording his adversary that advantage.

When Henry would stop, Kendor strategized he would draw his gun with his right hand while leaping to the ground onto his left side. Henry would fire the first shot, but at a distance permitting an accurate first shot at a stationary target, not accurate at a moving target. While on the ground, thereby presenting himself as a much smaller target, Kendor could afford to take the time to extend his right arm to aim carefully for his first shot at a standing, stationary Henry. No self-respecting duelist would employ such a strategy in front of witnesses.

The duelists continued their approaches. The separation shrank to well within Henry's accurate-first-shot range but Henry's strategy and confidence was oblivious to that. As the separation continued to diminish, the likelihood increased for Henry being able to even hit a leaping target with his first shot. Kendor's strategy would be in jeopardy if he were to wait longer. He drew, leaped, and landed with a bullet in his chest.

Henry, like Dan, both being of the next generation of gunslingers, was not encumbered by the habit of cocking the hammer with the hand not holding the six-shooter. Kendor witnessed that during their shared history but forgot that critical fact in the heat of the battle. He underestimated how far apart the duelists could be before Henry would likely be able to hit a moving target with his first shot from the hip before Kendor reached the relative safety of lying on the ground. Kendor's strategy was doomed several paces earlier than when he sprang into action.

A second and third bullet from Henry's six-shooter followed and the duel was over. Unlike Dan, Henry was not at all ambidextrous. In this duel, that ability would have been superfluous.

The hidden deputy emerged and nodded sincerely to confer both admiration and approval. Henry basked in it for a few moments.

Henry, in his mid twenties, already achieved renown during his pre-Wellbee life, but it was the kind of renown that obliged relocation and a name change. Whereas dueling between consenting adversaries was legal throughout the territory, gunning down unwilling opposition necessitated burying the winner's identity with the loser's corpse. In this instance, one could argue whether Henry won a duel against a consenting opponent, but the opponent was a wanted criminal and Henry was wearing a badge — special case exception noted. Henry took that lesson to heart.

Nothing Henry said in exhorting Kendor to accept the challenge and none of the vulgarities Kendor spewed in return disclosed Henry's buried life. When he first called out his challenge, Henry gambled that Kendor would not unmask him in the anticipated, verbal exchanges prior to the duel. If that were to have happened, Henry planned to kill the other deputy afterward and claim Kendor ambushed them before Henry returned fire. No one would be able to prove otherwise. To say forensic science was in its

infancy would be an understatement.

Having the hidden deputy later attest to Henry's expertise and glorious victory was the preferred outcome, by far. Kendor's babbling that merely demonstrated the duelists were familiar with each other some time in the past was fortunate for both Henry and the other deputy.

Henry found Kendor's horse by the stream and led it to Kendor's body while his partner retrieved their two horses. The two deputies foisted the corpse on its former steed and the threesome continued southward to find the posse searching the southern trail; thus ending their brief visit in the gully.

Vacation

Doubts evaporated.

For Henry and the other deputy in the gully, the banter preceding the shootout established Kendor's identity, beyond doubt. Once the two Wellbee posses rendezvoused in the town south of Roysbrook, the corpse was inspected. They found the scar at the right shoulder blade, confirming Kendor's identity for the other posse members, beyond doubt.

By the end of church services on Sunday, three days after Miller left a copy of the prior newspaper edition in Roysbrook, all residents there were apprised of the description of Kendor and were certain their most recent sheriff was Kendor, beyond doubt. They read that the parole board claimed Sheriff Coren was warned in advance of Kendor's early release. An alerted Sheriff Coren would have inspected at gunpoint for Kendor's scar on any stranger newly arrived in town. They were certain Coren was not warned, beyond doubt.

Nora and Lee were likewise certain, beyond doubt. They patiently, attentively, but unresponsively endured fellow congregants who tried to engage them on the topic immediately following services. While riding home, they convicted Kendor, in absentia, for the murder of Nora's father and convicted the parole board as accomplices.

When the Wellbee deputies rode into Roysbrook the next day with Kendor's body, the residents identified the corpse was their most recent sheriff, beyond doubt.

Townsfolk were thrilled with the outcome of the hunt and enthralled with Henry's saga of his duel. Rather than wait six more days until another Sunday, a small group rode out to Brankle Ranch to share the day's wonderful news. Nora's need for revenge was partially placated.

With identifications established beyond doubt, there was no longer value in transporting the corpse. The deputies dumped the body in an inconspicuous location off the trail while en route back to Wellbee; the bones to be picked clean by animals, birds, and insects. Upon returning to Wellbee, the six hunters received a warm welcome from all.

The sheriff paid the two temporary deputies for their service and retrieved their badges. He distributed the reward money equally among the six men. Henry complained fruitlessly that he deserved a greater share. During the ride back to Wellbee, Henry toyed with asking for a full time badge. The prospect of being the junior member of a gaggle of deputies weighed against the idea.

Receiving only one-sixth of the reward dissolved further scrutiny.

He chewed over offering his services to Roysbrook as their new sheriff but he deemed it beneath him to be a sheriff in a town he dismissed as “one-clogged-boot up from a dungheap.” The people of Wellbee praised him ever more widely as word spread of his duel with Kendor. He was reticent to leave that behind so soon.

The next, regularly scheduled edition of the newspaper ran the full story of the hunt for Kendor, especially the gully duel; plus news of the officially unsolved murder of Sheriff Coren, flavored with circumstantial evidence and copious insinuation that Kendor was the perpetrator. It quoted Wellbee deputies stating that Roysbrook residents were certain beyond doubt Coren was not warned Kendor was going to be released.

The reporter left copies of that edition in Roysbrook during his next circuit. Locals were anxious to read it — and read it aloud for the benefit of those who could not read. Nora habitually read the most recent newspaper edition when she came to town on Sundays. She read that edition not expecting to learn anything new.

She did read something new. The editor included an editorial urging residents of Wellbee to attend the subsequent parole board meeting and to voice their anger over the board's prior decision to release Kendor early. It stated parole board meetings occurred at 2 p.m. on the last Wednesday of each month. By the time Nora read the editorial, that subsequent meeting happened four days earlier. She formed a vivid memory of when the next meeting would be.

Wellbee residents had answered the editor's clarion call. Attendees overflowed the room. Wellbee's sheriff anticipated an agitated crowd. He and three deputies stood behind the parole board members, who were seated at a wide table in front of the room, all facing the audience. The sheriff had no sympathy for the board members but performed his duty, just the same. His other two deputies were posted outside the building. The audience was raucous and disrespectful but no one was confronted physically. At the conclusion of the meeting, the sheriff thanked the audience for eschewing intemperate brutishness and strongly urged everyone to sustain that paradigm — in more commonplace words than those. The sheriff and his deputies escorted all board members to their residences, receiving sincere gratitude from their charges in return.

Two weeks after that parole board meeting, at home on Lee's father's ranch, Nora had no appetite. Over the next several days, she became listless and suffered from sleep deprivation. When she spoke, the subject was almost exclusively about avenging her father. Lee offered to perform the required purification. She insisted on taking part so she could luxuriate in exacting her revenge. Lee reluctantly agreed and they formulated their plan. Nora regained her spirits and appetite.

For the next, last-Wednesday-of-the-month, parole board meeting, the Wellbee sheriff chose not to patrol with his full complement of badge-wearers. He expected the opportunity afforded locals during the prior meeting to vent and rail, coupled with the passage of a month, obviated such exigency. Furthermore, the newspaper had not urged a second coming of the rampage. The sheriff alone was in the room as the meeting began. Observing the reinstatement of pre-Kendor normalcy — as to both size and mood of the audience — confirmed his expectation and he soon left.

Two elderly looking figures, raggedly dressed all in black, rode into Haystack and hitched their horses. They unobtrusively entered the room, with the meeting already in session, and sat in the back. They were the last to leave after the meeting ended, feigning inability to move quickly due to the debilitations from old age. They lingered just outside the door. The parole board's employee obtained signatures from the board's five members on the official document recording the scant meeting minutes and left the room. Only the five board members remained, exchanging parting pleasantries. The two shadowy companions strode back into the room and approached the board members.

The shorter of the two, with a slight build, pulled out a Colt, dangled it with the barrel pointing down, and shrieked it was the gun that would have prevented Sheriff Coren from being murdered by Kendor if only Coren had been warned about Kendor's parole and, especially, if he was provided with a current description of Kendor. The speaker added venomously the dead sheriff was never warned. Removing a tall hat to reveal bountiful, red hair gathered and tied on top of her head, Nora declared the board were accomplices in the murder of her father.

The president started to explain his employee assured him …

Nora took the grip of the gun in her palm, pointed it at the president and fired. Lee took his gun out of his inside coat pocket. They killed all five members of the board while not knowing who was actually responsible for failing to warn Nora's father nor that two members of the board voted against early release of Kendor.

The truth is rarely as damning as the suspicions aroused when the truth is withheld. Not that it would have mattered in this case. If Nora had been confronted with the truth, she would have discounted it. Too often we would rather continue to be wrong than admit we were.

Nora put her hat on and the two left the building briskly, with guns still in hands to dissuade anyone from interfering. They mounted their horses and galloped out of town, eastward. Once well out of sight from townspeople, they stopped to retrieve their coach, hidden a short distance from the trail. They hitched their nondescript horses to the coach, quickly changed back into the genteel clothes they wore since they left Roysbrook two days earlier, and continued their trip toward Wellbee.

A posse approached, paused at their coach and inquired about two riders in black. Nora declared two men dressed in black rode past them earlier. The posse continued their pursuit.

Lee and Nora took a room for a one night stay in Wellbee when they arrived. They called on the sheriff in his office, who was still waiting for his posses to return from their searches. They introduced themselves, explained casually they would be continuing westward in the morning for their extended vacation to recover from the shock of losing Nora's father, and asked where they could find Henry to thank him for bringing the murderer of Nora's father to “justice.” When restitution is precluded, “justice” and “revenge” are synonyms.

The sheriff answered with a few suggestions regarding plausible Henry locations and then confided the day's events, watching for reactions. Lee displayed none. Nora, likewise stone-faced, informed him they already heard all that from the hotelier. When she mentioned there were two riders dressed in black who passed them on the trail, she observed more of a reaction from the sheriff than he had observed from the married couple. She paused a few seconds and then admitted with a tinge of feigned embarrassment she felt no sympathy for the people who were gunned down. She expressed confidence the sheriff understood why.

Nora and Lee found Henry and the three of them shared a congenial conversation, notwithstanding Lee discerning Henry's attention all but affixed on Nora. Nora stated that Roysbrook needed a sheriff and urged Henry to apply for the position. The accolades bestowed on Henry by residents of Wellbee diminished as days passed and any invitation presented by Nora was inherently alluring. Henry reversed his earlier dismissal of applying for that position and said he would. Walking to their room, Nora assured Lee his jealousy was unwarranted.

All posses reconvened in Wellbee by dusk and reported to the sheriff. Only one posse had anything of interest to contribute, which was not news to the sheriff by then. Deputies and other posse members retired for the night, leaving the sheriff to ponder. Revenge had to be the motive, but whose and for whom?

Were the two killers residents of Wellbee for whom the ranting at the prior parole board meeting inadequately slaked their desire for revenge over the shopkeeper's murder? No one came to mind. The shopkeeper Kendor allegedly murdered lived alone and had no known relatives in town, neither residing nor visiting. He was generally well liked but that was all. The sheriff rejected this avenue of the investigation.

Revenge for Kendor's alleged murder of Sheriff Coren seemed the more likely motive. Coren was very popular in Roysbrook and Nora saw two riders fitting the description of the killers fleeing toward

Roysbrook. But would two residents of Roysbrook who were not relatives of Coren gun down the board members over the death of their sheriff? Coren's only family was Nora and her husband. Was it just a coincidence they were coming to Wellbee this day? The couple had not arrived yet and they made no effort to keep a low profile once they did; in fact, quite the contrary. The one posse's report of interest described the couple in their coach as refined. Reports from witnesses described the fleeing killers dressed not-at-all that way. Would refined people be killers? Would a woman be one of the killers? The sheriff deemed this avenue of the investigation unlikely.

Did Nora hire two assassins? Did the assassins escape in a direction other than toward Roysbrook and Nora lied about seeing the killers fleeing toward Roysbrook in order to help them escape? If true, how could that be proven? She would surely deny it. The sheriff decided he would go to Roysbrook with two deputies but relented upon recalling that witnesses in Wellbee failed to consistently describe either of the killers with enough confidence and detail to recognize them even if they were hired hands at Lee's father's Brankle Ranch. The sheriff deemed this avenue of the investigation pointless.

Was one of the two killers a convict who served his full sentence after parole was denied? Were the two killers relatives of someone still incarcerated and denied parole? The sheriff decided he would assign his deputies in the morning to review parole board minutes, combing for a suspect.

After taking abundant precautions to safeguard the parole board members a month earlier, the sheriff let down his guard for this meeting. He feared the newspaper editor would write scathingly about his decision not to maintain at least one badge-wearer in the parole board room during the entire meeting.

The next newspaper edition was published on schedule, eighteen days later, refilled with news of murder. The coverage of the killers of the five parole board members included accounts from witnesses in the building and on the road. It highlighted the lead Nora provided of two galloping riders, dressed in black, heading east out of Wellbee. In un-lamenting tenor, it stated there were no suspects. These articles were far less sympathetic to the latest victims than prior coverage of the murders of the shopkeeper and Sheriff Coren.

Not appearing in the article: any disparaging comment regarding Wellbee's sheriff or reminder how the newspaper fanned flames of anger directed at the parole board members. The editor could not offer a scapegoat without sharing culpability, so omitted both.

Henry kept his word to Nora. Roysbrook was pleased to accept him as their new sheriff. He was anxious to resume practicing his gunfighting skills, especially dueling skills, like he did while residing in Wellbee. Being the law enforcer in his new town of residence, he could do so inside town limits with impunity, for all to witness. Unfortunately, the Roysbrook sheriff's office that greeted newly hired Sheriff Henry was still devoid of what Kendor stole when he fled. First, Henry needed the office's stock

of ammunition replenished.

The position of sheriff of Roysbrook came with a stipend in proportion to that small town's resources. That remuneration was also intended to cover all the sheriff's necessary supplies. It would take months to fully replenish what Kendor raided. The Wellbee deputies confiscated Kendor's belongings before Henry had any inkling he would eventually occupy the raided office. He could register a claim for what was left in Wellbee from that stash. Such a plea was beneath him. Instead, Henry cajoled the people of Roysbrook into assessing themselves a one-time levy. They complied.

Henry resumed practicing. There was muttering about him using ammunition prodigiously and furtive grumbling anticipating a request for another levy. No one brought up the topic with Henry. He shamelessly called over townspeople to show off, like a child impressing a parent, and urged them to praise his demonstrations enthusiastically to the reporter when the reporter would return on his circuit. They complied.

With events — as in: lack of events — in the territory back to normal since the rash of killings, the reporter scrounged his beat for morsels to write about. He drafted an article for the next newspaper edition brimming with unsolicited quotes from a few Roysbrook folks praising Henry's speed and accuracy while practicing. The editor/owner of the newspaper disliked Henry's arrogance from first impression and excluded the quotes. The reporter sought regress, reminding his boss that Wellbee customers of the newspaper acclaimed Henry as the hero of the Kendor hunt. The appeal garnered reluctant permission and the quotes were reinstated. Those who sell news are compelled to sell entertainment.

However, the editor instructed the reporter to draft a second article and outlined what he wanted in it. His employee left unsaid his realization that his boss wanted to spite Henry in the same edition he would praise him.

The next newspaper edition made no mention of the former parole board members, other than that no one applied to replace them.

The article announcing Henry as the new sheriff in Roysbrook reminded readers about his heroism in the gully and declared Roysbrook residents were doubly grateful for Henry avenging the murder of their beloved Sheriff Coren and for accepting the responsibility of that position. Henry was exceedingly pleased and proud of the article.

Another article was about Dan. In drafting that article as instructed, the reporter reviewed copies of old editions and compiled Dan's noteworthy deeds. That recapitulation of Dan's backstory was totally

new to Henry. The article included that witnesses in Roysbrook certified to the reporter back then how remarkable were Dan's speed and accuracy while firing both revolvers simultaneously at three moving riders. Henry resented sharing that spotlight, especially with Dan.

Henry developed a plan to combat that affront. When gunslingers would come to Roysbrook, even only stopping while passing through, he would use the collective recollection of Kendor's arrival in town as an excuse to extend an ultimatum to the stranger: leave or face him in a duel. If the stranger would back down, Henry's reputation would grow. If the stranger would accept, Henry's reputation would grow more so; provided he let the stranger go for his gun first and there were witnesses to corroborate that. Henry had to be good enough to allow any future opponent to begin to draw his gun first. This further impelled practice.

At the conclusion of their vacation, Nora and Lee stopped in Roysbrook before proceeding to their home on the outskirts of town. They called on the new sheriff at his office, both congratulating him and thanking him for taking the position.

While Lee engaged Henry in conversation, Nora read the two newspaper editions published since they left. She smiled softly at Lee during one of those rare moments when Henry was not gazing at her, indicating there were no suspects for the parole board killings. A little later, though, Lee lost his composure in mid sentence as he beheld Nora's flushed face. The article about Dan seared her eyes.

Lee stepped behind his wife and steadied her in his embrace as he looked over her shoulder at the newspaper. He was reassured she had not read more regarding the parole board but was gravely alarmed upon seeing the article that induced her reaction. Lee apologized to their host for the need to abruptly end their visit, explaining Nora was more tired from traveling than anticipated and they needed to proceed home and rest.

Lee was aware of his wife’s obsession and that her — and the town’s — condemnation of Dan over the murder of her former betrothed, William, was logically inane. In the interest of marital harmony, he kept his opinion of the matter to himself and hoped her malevolence toward Dan would dissipate. It was obvious the article she read rekindled her vengeance-driven hatred of Dan. Lee braced himself. Neither husband nor wife spoke while riding home.

Nora rambled about Dan and William over dinner that evening and left the table early, having eaten very little. Lee followed her into their bedroom where they were alone. He turned her around abruptly and put his hands on either side of her face. Two pairs of unblinking eyes engaged in a silent duel of tenacities. Nora looked downward and slumped. Lee released his grip. They returned together to the dining area and finished their meals.

Alice

Sitting together in the sheriff's office, Deputy Miller gestured a question to Dan inquiring what day he was born. Using his fingers, Dan indicated the year in which he was born but was unacquainted with the day. Ma Tendle instructed him on the year because she guessed it might be useful some time in the future. A perplexed deputy learned the Tendles never acknowledged — let alone celebrated — birthdays, anniversaries, or anything that differentiated one day from its nearest neighbors. Miller calculated Dan was twenty years old, give or take a year.

Over the next hour and at Miller's instigation, the two co-worker/friends created new gestures for their lexicon to communicate on the topic of lust. Dan grew up with animal husbandry on the Tendle farm. He understood procreation but he was untutored in pleasure that could be derived from human sexual activity. His parents never broached that subject with him. Miller set that objective for himself.

One building in Haystack was referred to among residents as “The House.” The occupants were four female employees plus their employer, who was the owner of the building and who went by the moniker, “Madam R.” The latter kept a shotgun nearby and was conversant in how to use it. She never allowed inebriated men into The House. Payment was required in advance and she closed for the night an hour after sunset. For supplemental dissuasion of those who might pose a danger to any of the women, Madam R purposefully purchased the house adjacent to the sheriff's office.

All five women were well accepted by most residents; even favored by some, especially by their clients. As for those who thought poorly of the five women, the five women thought poorly of them in return. At that time and place, prostitution was legal.

Deputy Miller, a bachelor, was probably their most appreciated client, had the ladies ever been so crass as to conduct a poll. He generally partook weekly. All the residents of The House felt extra safe when he was present. More importantly, he was always kind and caring. He conversed with whichever paramour of the evening he selected, both before and after the provided service, taking a genuine interest in their lives.

During Miller's endeavor to teach Dan about lust, Dan confessed an attraction for the ladies next door, who always seemed friendly and pleasant. Miller explained prostitution and questioned whether Dan was interested. The young man's face contorted slightly, conveying mixed emotions, but with the yay's outnumbering the nays. Miller decided Alice would be the best match for Dan.

Miller brought Dan to meet their neighbors, apprised Alice of relevant facts, and paid Madam R for his fellow deputy's induction. He then instructed Dan to let Alice do anything she would do and do anything she urged him to do.

Alice prided herself in conducting a nurturing initiation ceremony and took advantage of this opportunity to teach Dan how they could please each other. Dan was an excellent student and thrilled with it all. His parents would have been expected to bedevil their son with sexual morals that are generally practiced only by those who are members of neither the lowest nor highest socioeconomic castes. Ma and Pa doubted Dan would have any occasion to test sexual morals, so they did not instill any.

Alice was born, raised, and worked — as a school teacher — in the Midwest. A decade earlier, at age twenty-five, already branded a spinster through the most recent quarter of her twenty-five years, she married for the first and only time, thereby relinquishing her independence. She was not oppressed by a procreation imperative. The infusion of genetic attributes that generate the human instinct to procreate were absent. Alice succumbed to cultural pressure alone. Years later, her employment at The House eventually evidenced she was blessed with a kindred absence of the properly functioning anatomical features required to enable the fruition of a procreation instinct.

Less than a year after the marriage, her husband decided on behalf of both of them that a move from their common, Midwestern roots to the West Coast would be in their best interests. When they reached Haystack, en route, he contracted one of the many illnesses of the era and slowly died.

The couple's savings, barely enough to get them to the West Coast, was depleted by doctor fees and living expenses while her husband lingered, and depleted further by funerary bills. She could neither afford to continue the relocation nor return whence she came. Her only marketable skill was teaching school but there were no openings for that profession in Haystack, both at that time and for the foreseeable future.

Madam R projected a tough, business woman's veneer in public, hiding her empathetic and sympathetic tendencies. She followed Alice's plight from a distance, lest she be accused of preying on a vulnerable soul. At Madam R's confidential request, one of her employees approached Alice after the funeral and delicately volunteered a suggestion.

Alice saw no alternate recourse for herself. The two women talked at length as Alice posed numerous questions about what the prospect would entail. She moved into The House that same day. Living in The House since then, she wedded anew her emancipated independence.

Over the next couple of months, Dan visited Alice once per fortnight, on average, paying his own way, which was the limiting factor in determining the frequency of his patronage. Whereas Miller owned his house mortgage-free, Dan rented in a boarding house. Alice perceived Dan was not only unencumbered by morals, he was unencumbered by jealousy. For him, what Alice did with other men

was no different than tending to a farm or serving as a deputy – it was an occupation and everyone needed to work to live. He was never instructed to feel otherwise. Alice gradually taught him more performances from her repertoire, which he always enjoyed. In return, he gradually taught her more gestures from his language, which she eagerly mastered.

Upon taking residence in The House, Alice suppressed her nurturing inclination, though not completely. The residual was why Miller directed Dan to Alice. More thoroughly confined was her longing for friendship and intimacy unattainable from a client. The gratification she derived from her interactions with Dan, amplified by having to overcome impediments to achieve success, pleaded with her to allow those longings to escape.

She grappled with wanting to believe the change in their relationship would benefit Dan versus knowing the change would be driven by selfishly pursuing her own desires. She feared that seeking to satisfy her yearnings via Dan might awaken some jealousy demon heretofore repressed by him. She tried to imagine how it would end. There could never be a “happily, forever after” with anyone because she was resolved to remain faithful to her independence, forevermore.

Alice sought her employer's advice and received both that and Madam R's consent. Madam R understood she would lose a small portion of her monthly gross revenue, but was delighted for both Alice and Dan.

One night, after The House closed for business, Alice left for a walk. She meandered for a while until she arrived at the boarding house where Dan lived. She entered, went upstairs, and knocked on his door. Alice stayed that night with Dan. They grew to treasure their friendship and could not help but be concerned for each other's welfare and to want to protect each other. That part of human nature is indomitable, but there is a fine line between concern for another person and intruding on that person's independence.

Dan kept his boarding house room, mostly for the meals, but slept every night in Alice's room. They were discreet but such a pattern could not remain closeted. Some townsfolk disapproved, of course. Alice did not care and Dan was oblivious.

Stagecoaches came to and through Haystack periodically, with arrival times dubiously foretold by an official schedule. When arrival occurred in late afternoon, the two drivers and any passengers were obliged to stay for the night. In those instances, Sheriff Groden and his deputies hustled to the coach to take the measure of any new driver and of any male passengers. The sheriff's trusted tactic of stranger-sitting would not be feasible under these circumstances if anyone arriving was deemed unsavory — that person would not be able to leave until morning with the coach's departure. Nonetheless, it was hoped that an inquisitive, welcoming party of badge-wearers would strongly encourage comity

overnight.

A significant fraction of Madam R's sales receipts was derived during stagecoach overnight stays in town. Repeat clients were familiar quantities and never gave Madam R or her employees cause for alarm. Experienced drivers advised any drivers new to that route regarding rules of etiquette at The House. New drivers anticipated becoming repeat clients and posed no problems.

Madam R was more apprehensive of unaccompanied, male, coach passengers passing through only once. While those men were likewise advised by the experienced drivers, and by Madam R, there were occasions when those admonitions slipped a client's mind while alone in a room with one of the employees. The ladies developed and discussed tactics to deescalate an uncomfortable situation along with the skill for selecting which tactic would likely work best for any personality disorder they detected. With all first-time clients, Madam R stood outside the closed door, shotgun cradled, listening for any sound suggesting a need for assistance.

On one occasion, a well dressed, politely smiling, middle-aged man emerged from the coach. The three Haystack lawmen appeared and Sheriff Groden welcomed him and asked the usual questions — similar to modern, international travel, minus stamping a passport. The visitor was passing through town. He had no gun. His answers, appearance, and mannerisms alleviated concern. He checked into the hotel, strolled alone and unnoticed to The House, and pulled on the rope that rang the bell outside the front door.

As soon as Madam R opened the door, the visitor recited with disarming charm the rules of The House taught to him by the driver. She invited him in. He stated this was his first visit to The House and flatteringly took notice of the furnishings of the outer room. She led him into the parlor. All four employees were available at that moment and all dutifully assembled in the parlor upon hearing a visitor in the outer room — standard procedure. Madam R introduced the ladies, one at a time, slowly, to allow a new client to peruse his options less crudely than in silence — also standard procedure.

Instead of selecting his choice, the visitor requested Alice invite him to her room — not at all standard procedure. Alice did so, impressed by his magnanimous demonstration of deference.

Alice was never the choice of a first-time visitor, other than Dan being directed to her by Miller. The other ladies were more physically attractive. Alice accumulated a cadre of regular, repeat clients who initially selected her in pursuit of variety or when she alone was available. She was adept at gaining the trust of a client and never betrayed it. She listened earnestly and caressed approvingly, never judgmentally, attentively catering to both a client's body and soul.

Never picked by a first-time client was a double-edged sword: she did not endure an uncomfortable situation at The House but she did not gain experience in detecting and deescalating an uncomfortable situation. She was privy to her colleagues' discussions of their unpleasant clashes but that did not substitute for experience.

Her new client demurely passed the fee to Madam R in a cordial handshake then courteously extended his arm toward Alice. She stood and curled her arm through his. They walked toward the staircase and Alice turned her head back at her compatriots with eyes wide open in shock, conveying to them incredulity, as opposed to lauding a triumph. Her colleagues responded with supportive smiles conveying congratulations and encouragement. As for Madam R, upon hearing a door close upstairs, she took up her post outside the room, shotgun at the ready. This first-time visitor's style felt too pretentious for her to drop her guard.

Once the door of Alice's room closed, the man spoke only in a whisper. His first words asked her not to speak. Alice interpreted his behavior to suggest he valued privacy. Inflicted speechlessness was not her style, but acceptable. He inquired whether it would be alright for him to take the lead and requested she nod her head one way or the other to answer. She acquiesced. He instructed her to sit on the bed, look straight ahead, and be strictly passive. Alice, ever devoted to pleasing her clients, appreciated when a client clearly expressed what he wanted. Any of the other women would have already suspected dysfunction.

He sat next to her and slowly, gently, meticulously discovered and undid fasteners among her clothes. Some of Alice's clients liked to undress her, some wanted her to take care of that herself, and some preferred her only partially undressed. She discerned no alarming behavior with this visitor. Had she looked at him, as the other women would have, rather than complying strictly with his instructions to stare straight ahead, his menacingly ravenous glare might have alerted her otherwise.

The bell outside the front door rang. Alice and her client heard Madam R scurry down the creaking stairs. Along with the rules of The House, one of the stagecoach drivers informed Alice's client that Madam R would be standing outside the room with a shotgun to enforce the rules — hence his whispering and instruction to Alice to be silent. Alice's client was counting on another client's arrival interrupting Madam R's surveillance.

With his left hand on her right shoulder, he gently pushed her torso onto the bed. With his right hand, he reached behind himself and removed a six-inch-blade knife from a sheath hidden in his waistband. She gasped in shock when he abruptly positioned the knife in front of her face. He pressed his left hand firmly over her mouth and whispered he would slit her throat if she made a sound. She froze.

Excerpts from her colleagues' discussions of tactics they used in unpleasant clashes tumbled over each other in her mind, incomprehensibly. They were irrelevant since none of those clashes were nearly as dire as hers. Alice wondered how he could plausibly think he would get away with what he was doing. She considered pointing out that inevitability but remained immobile, instead, because she concluded it would not be advantageous to be dead when he would be caught. Alice was determined to survive.

He cut her clothes as slowly and meticulously as he undid the fasteners, leaving clinging tatters. He released the knife onto the bed next to her face and strangled her with both hands until she passed out.

She woke to the sound of her assailant downstairs bidding a good evening and receiving the same from Madam R. Alice sat upright and struggled to corral her wits. When she heard the front door close, she bolted out of the room to the top of the stairs and called Madam R's name loudly enough for only her employer to hear. The sight of Alice was enough for Madam R to grab her shotgun and dash out the front door in pursuit.

Madam R took five strides away from The House, raised her gun, and demanded the assailant stop. He did and turned to face her. Alice arrived at the open front door. Miller rushed out of the adjacent sheriff's office as soon as Madam R shouted, with Dan following close behind, unaware of the reason for the sudden exit.

It was deep dusk. Miller stopped when he recognized Madam R but, in the dim light and after seeing the stagecoach passenger only briefly earlier, he did not yet recognize the person at whom she was pointing her shotgun. Before Miller could begin to intercede, the man turned back and resumed walking toward the hotel. Madam R aimed low and fired. The man fell to his knees with pellets embedded in and near his buttocks. He raised both arms above his head, still facing away from the shooter, et al.

Alice's hands involuntarily clasped her mouth. Her movement in Dan's peripheral vision caught his attention and he swiveled toward her. Illuminated eerily by the light from within the house streaming through the doorway, Alice was an apparition, as if a tormented soul bound forevermore to guard the entrance of a cursed home. He choked at the sight of her tattered condition. Dan’s movement caught her attention and she twisted her face toward him. She rotated her palms, displaying a plea that he do nothing, but he had already swiveled back toward the man on his knees with arms raised. A pair of bullets entered the middle of her assailant's back, followed by another pair entering the base of the skull while the man's torso fell forward to the ground. The face hit the ground and the echo from the gunfire dissipated, leaving numbing silence.

Alice was the first to move. She collapsed to the threshold of the doorway, put her face in her hands,

and began sobbing uncontrollably. Dan sprinted to her, kneeled by her side, and put his arms around her shaking body while she continued to cry. Miller deduced the collapsed pile of rags was Alice and further deduced what happened to her. Two women arrived at the front room of The House while the other woman and her client hurriedly dressed themselves before coming downstairs.

Miller and Madam R were both certain the prone body was a corpse. They walked to it — he to learn who it was and she to gloat. Miller squatted and pushed the body over to see its face, then muttered quietly that the man surrendered. Madam R touched Miller on the shoulder. Her soundless shrug insisted that Miller's muttered fact was irrelevant. Deputy Miller and Alice both believed that fact was not irrelevant.

Miller stood up. Madam R walked back toward the assemblage in her home's front doorway. Sheriff Groden bolted out of his house and hastened toward the sound of gunfire. Recognizing Miller standing over a body, Groden veered toward him. The undertaker spotted Groden and pursued him. Others gathered at a safe distance, as looky-loos are wont to do. To prevent them from discerning details, Miller scurried toward the looky-loos and ordered them to come no closer, proclaiming as justification that the sheriff and undertaker needed to examine the body first.

Groden immediately identified the man at Miller's feet by the clothes. Without speaking, he kneeled to verify the body was a corpse and to search for the cause of death. With the undertaker standing next to him, that search uncovered scattered wounds indicative of buckshot plus two pairs of bullet entry wounds, all in the rear of the body. The bullet holes of each pair were separated by only a few inches. He was well aware of that signature from practice sessions with his deputies.

Groden urged the undertaker to bring his cart. Miller retreated from his outpost to stand next to his boss. The growing crowd still kept at bay. Groden pivoted around and saw three shapes huddled at the bottom of the doorway of The House, with others crouching or standing just inside. The three rose slowly and went inside, closing the door behind them. He felt obliged to go there but Miller urged him to postpone. While they waited for the undertaker, Miller turned his back to the crowd and quietly recounted what he witnessed.

The sheriff listened patiently. He grew angry with himself for not seeing past the stagecoach passenger's facade and not keeping a closer watch on him. He grew furious with the deceased based on what the deputy surmised that man did. He grew consternated over what to do about his other deputy shooting an unarmed man in the back after he surrendered. This resurrected the sheriff's relevant concern when he first met Dan with Pa — a concern Miller worked so hard in the past to alleviate.

Sheriff Groden empathized with Dan. Groden imagined if his own wife were assaulted, he would want to kill the assailant; but he was not sure whether he would shoot the assailant in the back after

surrendering. It was difficult to blame Dan while harboring doubts about what he would do, himself.

Groden asked who witnessed the shooting and Miller listed the four people of whom he was aware: Madam R, Alice, Dan and himself. The sheriff directed Miller to maintain the perimeter from the impatient crowd, search the body for valuables and any names of next of kin, assist with putting the corpse in the cart when the undertaker would return, make sure the body would be covered before the cart moved past the crowd, tell the crowd their sheriff would make a statement the next day regarding what happened, gain access to the dead man's hotel room, and search any luggage and belongings that were there.

The sheriff walked toward The House to find out if anyone else saw the shootings or learned of them. An expressionless Madam R opened the door in response to Groden ringing the bell and invited him in. He asked her to step outside to talk with him. She did and immediately began recounting the same record of recent events that Miller recounted, except she added a disgusted, thorough description of Alice's condition. Madam R ended by emphatically asserting both she and Dan were justified in what they each did. In response to Groden's follow-on question, she said she rebuffed all entreatments from the others in The House who were late to the event and that Alice, in a state of shock, retired to her room with Dan, by themselves, without saying anything.

Madam R anticipated what Groden would want to request but would prefer not to. She volunteered confidently neither she nor Alice would be confiding in anyone. In truth, Alice had not agreed to that assertion but did so the next day when Madam R strongly advised it.

Groden was pleased to hear that, especially without officially encouraging it. The sheriff took his leave of Madam R, asking her to convey to Alice his best wishes for a speedy recovery.

The crowd began dispersing with the members disappointed they had to wait to have their curiosities addressed. The sheriff caught up with the undertaker who stopped and stated quietly that his official finding would be that the body was too badly damaged to ascertain details. Groden nodded gratefully.

The unsolicited cooperation from Madam R and the undertaker almost moved the sheriff to tears. He had to come up with an official story for everyone's consumption — a truthful account, if not the whole truth.

Dan stayed with Alice that first night. Neither slept well. She needed to be an innocent young girl in her mother's embrace. He needed to be standing immovably in front of the door to The House when that stagecoach passenger arrived there. Shackled by those requirements, they could not console each

other. No one could.

The next morning, the three Haystack lawmen gathered in the sheriff's office. Miller put on the table all the valuables he found among the passenger's clothes and luggage. No name of next of kin was unearthed.

The sheriff left the office, found the undertaker, handed him some of the passenger’s money, and asked whether that would be enough to cover his services. The undertaker counted the money. It exceeded his normal charge by an amount appropriate for special circumstances but not by an amount large enough to appear to be a bribe. He replied it would.

Groden called for an impromptu town meeting. He announced the stagecoach passenger cruelly assailed one of the women at The House and Deputy Tendle shot and killed the assailant. He further declared the shooting was justified and that things of value found on the assailant or in his luggage were used to pay funerary costs and the rest would be allotted to the assailant's victim as compensation for the harm she suffered. The crowd's curiosity was not satiated by that abbreviated report and many questions rang out. The sheriff stated that was all there was to know and retreated to his office where his two deputies awaited his return.

Townsfolk deprived of a rigorous narrative of events invented their own tales. A few in the crowd on the night of the shooting spotted huddled figures at the front door of The House; however, no one could discern with certainty who they were or what they were doing there. Most folks were abreast of the gossip that Deputy Tendle and Alice had a relationship beyond client and purveyor. Some folks claimed they heard a shotgun blast just before hearing two revolver blasts. It was known that Madam R possessed a shotgun. With these pieces of evidence plus the minimal details Groden shared, rumors took flight and competed with each other in the arena of public appeal.

Winning that competition was an extravagant rumor. The stagecoach passenger stole money from Madam R when she was not looking. One of the ladies of the house saw it happen and tried to stop him as he was leaving. He punched her in the face and knocked her to the floor. The other ladies came to her aid while Madam R got her shotgun and ran after him. Deputy Tendle was outside the sheriff's office at that moment and saw Madam R demand the passenger stop. The passenger turned toward Madam R and began drawing his gun. She fired. The passenger was hit but was still able to finish drawing his gun, aimed at her, and shot once. His bullet grazed her right arm causing her to drop her shotgun. Tendle shot him before the passenger could shoot at Madam R again. Madam R went back to the front door of The House where her other employees revived the knocked down woman and they all went inside to tend to Madam R's injury.

First Runner-Up accidentally embodied a partially accurate detail or two. The stagecoach passenger

beat and raped Alice. Alice went to the sheriff's office and found Deputy Tendle. She showed him what happened to her. Tendle challenged him to a duel — a plausible explanation of how a deaf, mute man did so in the almost-dark of deep dusk was omitted. The two men faced each other but before either drew, Madam R came out of her house and fired her shotgun at the passenger. She missed. The passenger began his draw first and Tendle killed him with two shots before the passenger was able to fire at all. Alice ran back to the house. Madam R embraced her. Tendle ran to both of them and added his arms to the embrace. They all went inside.

The following rumor garnered the Congeniality Award. The stagecoach passenger raped one of the other three working women in The House. Alice went to the sheriff's office and found Deputy Tendle. She begged him to avenge her fellow worker. Tendle challenged the rapist to a duel. Madam R came out with her shotgun and said she would fire her gun into the air as the signal for each duelist to draw. Tendle won.

Dis-Honorable Mention went to the following rumor. The stagecoach passenger raped Madam R. She fetched her shotgun and pursued her attacker as he was leaving The House. Alice went to the sheriff's office and found Deputy Tendle. She informed him what happened and that Madam R was going to face the passenger by herself. Tendle ran after both of them. Madam R fired at the rapist but missed. The rapist stopped, turned, drew a gun, and Tendle shot him twice before the rapist could fire. A badly shaken Madam R slinked back to The House and the ladies guided her inside.

There were other, even less plausible rumors. Oddly, none of the rumors included Deputy Miller's whereabouts and actions prior to Dan killing the passenger. Whenever anyone baited Madam R, Miller, the undertaker, or the sheriff with a rumor, the baiter always received nothing in return.

Deputy Miller repeatedly replayed in his mind the shotgun cocktail with the handgun chasers. He rationalized that the blast was a warning shot, appropriate under the circumstances. The chasers defied his morals. He allayed the imagery each time by reminding himself the sheriff accepted it all. Even so, his trust in his ability to communicate with Dan suffered, as did his trust in his understanding of him.

Alice was minimally damaged physically. Emotionally, the effects from that night were profound. She often relived both the attack and Dan's execution of the attacker in her memory and nightmares. Her self-confidence and self-esteem were both shattered. She became agitated and fled when her housemates tried to be supportive. She would not leave The House because she could not bear receiving questions from townsfolk or hearing words of token sympathy. Her self-imposed banishment destroyed her cherished independence.

She could not continue her profession. She sequestered herself in her room during open hours, listening at her door in a pointless effort to detect a dangerous voice so that she could warn her

colleagues. She began paying Madam R out of her savings for her room and board in The House. Madam R had no prospect for replacing her unproductive employee, so she deemed the altered arrangement acceptable, temporarily. The other ladies in The House grew resentful over Alice's rejection of their earnest efforts to help her, coupled with their extra burden of clients.

Dan continued to stay with Alice every night and they shared the bed, as before; although she made him understand she could not be with him as before. She felt safer with him by her side and his presence helped her calm down when she woke terrified from a nightmare. It was not enough for her.

Dan grew despondent under his burden of guilt that he did not protect Alice. They barely communicated with each other any more. That unrelenting withdrawal from him demonstrated in his mind she blamed him.

Alice longed to be near family and rekindle old friendships. She needed to leave The House, leave Haystack, to have any chance of relegating it all to the past. She feared how her leaving would affect Dan but she feared she could never accept that Dan shot in the back a man with hands raised.

Inadvertently, Dan made her decision easier. He became overly protective and smothering. She grew short-tempered with him, with each such incident followed by her dissolving into uncontrollable sobbing.

The compensation she received from her assailant's valuables along with her savings was enough for her to relocate back to where she grew up, buy a small house, and start her life anew. The longer she stayed in Haystack without income to cover expenses, the more her savings would dwindle, jeopardizing that opportunity.

Trying to choose how best to explain her decision to Dan, Alice imagined conversations. Any approach that would require her to invent and define a new gesture into their shared language was ruled out — that would take too long and the digression would destroy the flow. She doubted she could still be patient with the frustration always inherent with inventing gestures. Her emotions were too raw.

She imagined Dan offering to go with her and rehearsed explaining that his parents, his fellow lawmen, and all of Haystack needed him. She rehearsed her other reason to decline such an offer: that she needed to leave everything behind if she were to have any chance of stopping the nightmares. She could not choose between the two regrets and decided she would concatenate them. She liked that idea so much she decided to preempt a possible offer by Dan to accompany her and tell him up front she thought about asking him to go with her. Then she would immediately launch into the concatenated monologue. The final lines would stress how much she appreciated both him and what they shared,

wish him only the best in the future, and emphasize that her needing to leave was in no way his fault.

When the time came, Dan watched her face and hands stoically. He offered no response, neither interrupting nor upon her finale. They embraced one last time and, to her great relief, he nodded with a slight smile to indicate he understood. What he understood was that he failed.

Joseph

Alice boarded the next coach eastbound, which stopped for the first night of her trek in Roysbrook. Sheriff Henry greeted her and the couple with whom she shared the coach. A little more than a half year passed since Henry became sheriff of Roysbrook. Only two men wearing guns passed through his town during that time and Henry did not succeed in goading either into a duel. He was disappointed yet again at the lack of a prospect onboard the newly arrived coach.

A little later, a westbound coach stopped in Roysbrook for the night. One lone passenger disembarked from the coach. Henry's spirits rose upon noting the arrival of an unaccompanied male, only to be dashed by the sight of the passenger's lack of armaments and that he wore the clothes of a gentleman. With unhidden disgust in his manner and words, Henry curtly demanded the passenger's destination. The man replied matter-of-factly he had arrived at his destination.

Two men emerged from the saloon. They approached Henry and the hounded gentleman. One called out asking whether the latter was Joseph Gellerson and received an affirming nod in response.

Henry was acquainted with both those men — they were employees at Brankle Ranch — so he did not harass them when they rode into town in a wagon a couple of hours earlier, as they had many times before. With the sound of the first arriving coach, one of the Brankle employees peaked out of the saloon, noted it was eastbound, and returned to his partner. With the second sound of an arriving coach, they paid their bill for that afternoon's libations and began fulfilling their assigned task.

The two workers loaded Joseph and his luggage into the wagon and headed to Brankle Ranch, rectifying Henry's surprised face by casually mentioning Joseph was a new hire at the ranch. Henry's face discarded surprise in favor of disconcertion upon learning this well-dressed, handsome man would be working for Nora.

Lee's father decided he needed another employee, one who could greatly reduce cattle rustling at Brankle Ranch. He communicated with a friend in Kansas City and requested, as a favor, finding an appropriately qualified man for the new position. Joseph, until recently a Pinkerton employee, was fired after an "aggressive action" resulted in gunning down several people who might not have been breaking the law at that moment. Joseph was convinced he acted appropriately but pragmatism prevailed upon him. He chose to accept the offer while the incident was being investigated by the authorities. The favor requested by Lee's father was serendipitous for both Joseph and his next employer.

Lee's father, like everyone in Roysbrook, knew how Henry dealt with anyone arriving with a visible

gun. He added a postscript in his letter to his friend in Kansas City advising that a person taking the position should arrive with his weapons stashed inside his luggage. The return letter from Kansas City introducing the new hire and his scheduled arrival date preceded Joseph's coach by two days.

When the Brankle Ranch's wagon with Joseph and his luggage aboard returned to the ranch, Lee and his father emerged from the house together, while Nora stationed herself in their home's doorway to learn why. Lee instantly shared Henry's disconcertion over Joseph's appearance and for the same reason.

The owner of Brankle Ranch lived on the sprawling property in a large house with his son and daughter-in-law. Employees had separate accommodations and never partook of a meal in the family's house. Nora called out from the doorway saying dinner was ready and invited the newly arrived stranger inside to share the meal with them. Not yet acquainted with the family's traditions, Joseph immediately accepted heartily. The other two men were trapped, aware how awkward it would be to overrule the invitation at that moment. In private, after dinner, the employer kindly instructed his new employee that such an invitation should be respectfully declined if presented in the future.

Introductions and pleasantries around the dinner table included Nora entreating Joseph to speak about his background. Joseph mentioned he dictated his background for the letter from Kansas City but said he would be pleased to recount it. Nora displayed no reaction when hearing about that letter for the first time.

Lee's father shared that letter from Kansas City with his son when it arrived. Lee chose to keep it to himself and requested his father do the same. His father inferred no alarm from that request and acquiesced without needing justification. The justification was that Lee feared Nora, upon learning Joseph's background, might try to enlist Joseph as her champion in a revitalized quest for revenge against Dan. Lee gratefully believed that quest remained at least dormant since Lee — via the silent confrontation in their bedroom three months earlier — demanded she end it.

That quest had not been completely dormant. Nora searched for an avenue to approach Henry during the past three months. Lee and Nora visited Roysbrook most Sundays to attend church services. Two Sundays per month, the couple visited Sheriff Henry's office to read the latest newspaper edition. Always recalling the first time Henry paid excessive attention to Nora — in Wellbee — Lee made sure he accompanied his wife wherever she might be accosted by Henry. That did not prevent Henry repeating his attentiveness whenever he was in Nora's presence, but Lee believed his own presence kept Henry from attempting anything less tolerable.

Lee tried to persuade Nora that visiting Henry’s office once per month would be adequate for catching up on the prior two newspaper editions. She reminded him of her father's murder in order to

make the point that news in any edition might be urgently needed. Lee could not overcome that argument. He always hoped Henry would not be in his office during their visit. That hope always met a tragic end.

Nora strongly suspected Lee would not agree to any suggestion from her that might allow her — unintentionally, of course — to meet Henry by herself and that Lee would suspect her intentions immediately upon hearing a proposal of such a ruse. There was an annual meeting in Wellbee with meat industry representatives from Kansas City. Lee and his father attended together in the past. She rummaged through ideas for how she might meet Henry during the next meat industry meeting, or even to just pass him a note surreptitiously; but each idea contained a fatal flaw that one or more persons might observe the rendezvous and report it to Lee upon his return. She speculated about using an intermediary to give a sealed note to Henry but she had no trusted confidant to enact the deed.

Even if she were to succeed in communicating with Henry privately, she floundered with what she could offer him as incentive. She had no money of her own and no access to Brankle assets. If she offered any of her minimal jewelry, the absence from her person would be noticed. It repulsed her to think of offering herself to an unwashed lout, incapable of discretion in or after the consummation, and likely to use the event to blackmail her.

While the implacable obstacles to a plan raced on a closed track in her brain, she stifled any hint the quest still consumed her. Lee wishfully envisioned Joseph would have an unappealing, weathered, trail-worn appearance and, henceforth, Nora would take no interest in him; let alone perceive Joseph as a plausible champion for her quest. That first sight of Joseph, dapper and handsome, disabused Lee of his aspiration. Nora's invitation to Joseph for dinner sealed that vision's fate.

In a monotone, Joseph delineated multiply tested skills and qualifications relevant to his new job description. Regarding the Pinkerton line from his résumé, Joseph only touched on his fifteen years of prior service with that company. With her interest piqued by the glaring omission, Nora inquired about his motivation for leaving Pinkerton. Joseph merely spoke of wanting changes.

Nora surmised why she was not privy to the contents of the letter from Kansas City. She directed no further conversation toward Joseph and demonstrated no interest in him or anything he said during the rest of dinner. She spoke not of him afterward, either. Lee's fear of Nora trying to enlist Joseph subsided, fulfilling phase one of her plan.

She waited patiently three months for the meat industry meeting in Wellbee. Lee and his father left together. Nora went out that same morning to inspect the Brankle herd of cattle on behalf of her temporarily absent husband and father-in-law. She never did that before.

She approached Joseph when he was alone and congratulated him on earning a glowing evaluation from her surprise inspection. He suppressed his surprise over her surprise inspection as he thanked her.

Nora launched into a tale of how her father died. Joseph listened patiently, sympathetically. With tears forming in her eyes, she apologized for not being able to continue with her narrative, except to assert angrily that there was a string of events that led to her father's death and, ultimately, Dan Tendle was responsible for both the death of her father and the death of her former fiancé. She flowed among a series of other emotions: disgust that Haystack dared make that murderer a deputy, frustration that she could not avenge her losses by herself, yearning that someone would do what she could not, and finishing with coyness over how she would demonstrate her gratitude generously if Joseph would be her avenger. She gambled Joseph would never repeat any of their discussion because he would anticipate she would deny it and he would be fired. He agreed to consider her offer.

Upon returning from Wellbee, Lee notified Joseph when his father and the representatives from Kansas City agreed the annual, Brankle cattle drive would begin that year. Lee confided he enjoyed visiting Wellbee, donning on it the epithet of being the city in the territory most like Kansas City. He suggested Joseph take a well deserved break after returning from the cattle drive to visit Wellbee. Joseph agreed to consider his offer, too.

Joseph stayed two nights at Brankle Ranch to recover from the ordeal of the cattle drive. He verified that Lee's prior offer still stood. Lee was true to his word. Joseph, wearing his gun and bringing his rifle, rode to Haystack for a one night stay en route to Wellbee. After renting a room, he relaxed and ordered a meal in a saloon.

Sheriff Groden with his two deputies appeared soon thereafter and surrounded the stranger. As required by the sheriff, Joseph identified himself and stated his planned itinerary. Joseph was obliged to show his room key as partial verification of his stated itinerary. Groden quizzed him about lesser circulated facts to verify Joseph's claim of being an employee at Brankle Ranch on a short vacation. Dan stood vigilantly, hands slightly raised at his side, both guns unbuckled but holstered, determined not to let his guard down unless and until Miller would instruct him to do so. Joseph suspected something was “not normal” about that one deputy.

Groden was satisfied neither stranger-sitting nor surveillance would be needed and Miller gave Dan the at-ease signal. Over the intervening half year, Groden succeeded in putting the incident outside The House behind him. Dan had not — the wraith of prior failure still haunted him. He communicated back to Miller he would keep watch on the stranger from across the road until The House closed for the night, despite Groden determining that would not be necessary.

The three lawmen started to leave the saloon. Joseph offered to buy them all drinks if they would

stay a little while and enlighten him about Haystack. Groden wanted to get home and politely declined. Joseph bid the sheriff a good night. Dan had no interest in “chatting” with a stranger and informed Miller he was going to take up his self-appointed post. Miller communicated to Dan he would stay and visit with the stranger and then go to The House himself. Dan accepted that alternate plan and informed Miller he would go home, instead. Joseph raised one hand to offer the universal, open-palm goodbye; but Dan had reverted to his standard, non-engaging mannerisms toward a stranger who was no longer a potential target. Joseph’s unrequited hand slipped back onto the table.

Miller accepted the invitation, sat at Joseph's table, and introduced himself. Joseph failed to hide his shock when he heard Miller's name. Nora portrayed Dan to Joseph as a murderous gunslinger. She left out that Dan was deaf and mute. Joseph's stereotype of the person who incurred Nora's wrath wrenched free from all anchors in his psyche. He submitted to Miller an excuse for his startled reaction: he mistakenly remembered hearing Miller's name before. As he apologized, he glanced through the front windows of the saloon barely in time to see Dan enter his boarding house across the road.

The two men swapped tales for almost an hour. At those instants where Dan's name arose, Joseph wanted to ask questions, seeking more details, but did not. If and when lawmen would be searching for a murder suspect in the near future, Joseph wished to preclude any retrospection by Miller recalling Joseph's prior interest in Dan; so he displayed none. Therefore, Joseph only learned some, minor details of what was at variance with Nora's performance. The two gossipers parted company amicably, with Miller caught up on the state of affairs at Roysbrook and Brankle Ranch — beyond what he read in the newspaper — and with Joseph conflicted.

Joseph proceeded to Wellbee the next day and rented a room for two nights. One morning was all it took for him to decide Lee's comparison of Wellbee to Kansas City should have been offered as sarcasm rather than praise. He wanted to visit the newspaper office, anticipating he could learn more about Dan's role in Nora's losses by looking through old editions, presuming every newspaper company would maintain a collection of its own publications. Similarly as before, he worried that someone recalling he asked to see old editions could later cast suspicion his way in a near-future hunt for murder suspects. Joseph failed anew to uncover what would have fully demolished Nora's accusation.

The would-be assassin checked out and left Wellbee early the next morning. He stopped in Haystack only long enough to get a hearty meal, meet several residents, and tell them he intended to reach Roysbrook before nightfall. Then he rode on eastward for a few miles and found a sheltered place off trail to camp for the night.

With dawn's first light, he rode back toward Haystack, secured his horse out of sight of the trail, took his rifle, and stole into town. Ensconced in a dark, secluded site with an unobstructed view of the front door of Dan's boarding house, he waited. As long as Dan emerged before the sun rose too high in the sky, Joseph's escape route would be in deep shadow far enough to avoid detection from the road. He

could reach his horse before badge-wearers foraged for witnesses and constructed a plan of action.

Imageries in his mind’s-eye and thoughts in his mind’s-mouth battled for his attention. The former Pinkerton man relived his “aggressive action” in Kansas City. He still believed that was justified. Would it be justified to gun down the man who was responsible for the deaths Nora mourned? Would he end up needing to leave behind another, well paid, security guard employment — fleeing the gallows, not just a potential prison term? Nora's red hair flashed. Would the consummation of her long-delayed revenge inspire her to give herself to him vivaciously rather than dutifully? Would it be only one time? He recalled Dan standing awkwardly near the table where Joseph sat in the saloon, averting his eyes after receiving the at-ease signal from Miller. How could Dan be responsible for the death of two men from Nora's past and escape accountability all this time while in plain sight just one town away, especially a man with such an impediment?

A badge reflected a glint of light from the low, early morning sun. Dan stopped in front of his boarding house and looked all around before proceeding — a necessity for those who are deaf. Joseph drew a bead on him. No one else was in sight. The assassin was still hidden in deep shadow. All was in accordance with his plan, except his own resolve.

Dan walked toward the sheriff's office and out of sight of Joseph's rifle. Joseph retreated through the shadows along his escape route and walked toward his horse. He rode to Roysbrook, fending off persisting battles among imageries and thoughts; largely unsuccessfully.

In Roysbrook, Joseph stopped in the saloon and drew together a small group of long-time residents by offering to buy a round. There would be no second chance to assassinate Dan, but he needed the truth. No longer guarding against future suspicions, he asked directly about the death of Nora's father. The group of townsfolk remembered well how their former sheriff was murdered and unanimously agreed their current sheriff killed the murderer in what they referred to as “The Duel in the Gully.” Partial vindication bolstered the spirits of the self-foiled assassin.

Joseph asked about the death of Nora's former fiancé, William. His cohorts described the shootout between Dan and three gunmen that resulted in the deaths of William and the three gunmen. Joseph postulated aloud that it was Dan who shot William. All contradicted that theory vehemently, explaining William was shot down by the three gunmen before Dan exited the store. With a sigh of relief, Joseph ventured a conclusion aloud that the three gunmen were responsible for William's death. He was contradicted with the assertion it was ultimately Dan's fault. A sudden surge of butterflies invaded the failed-assassin's stomach.

The residents confidently presented their convoluted logic connecting William's death to Dan defending himself in a prior shootout. The former Pinkerton man shook his head slowly, disparagingly.

He paid the bar bill for the group’s round of drinks, as he promised, and left the saloon without another word. For the first time since William was shot, that connection between William's death and a prior shootout no longer seemed solid to those who accepted Joseph’s generosity that day. They dispersed without speaking among themselves or others on the matter.

Returning to Brankle Ranch, the itinerant employee avoided Nora assiduously forevermore. After a few days of being shunned, Nora correctly inferred all of what that meant.

Samuel

Words flew to Sheriff Groden's office that a stranger with a holstered gun arrived in Haystack. Groden with his two deputies entered the saloon wherein the stranger was sighted. Groden led the threesome but stopped soon after walking through the door. Miller and Dan moved quickly to either side of their boss, alerted more than usual to the potential presence of danger by Groden's hesitation. The seated stranger surveyed the three men with reproving eyes.

Groden maintained a vigilant stare while he commanded his deputies to remain in place. Miller relayed the command to Dan. They correctly inferred this episode of stranger-sitting would begin one-on-one. Even still, they both stood at the ready.

Groden approached the stranger methodically, his rifle always pointed downward, and stopped when he was ten feet away. The stranger stood at a snail's pace, his six-shooter still strapped into its holster at his side. Others in the saloon moved away and sought cover.

Groden accused the stranger of having blinked first and the stranger chuckled and declared Groden the winner. The two men laughed heartily as they scanned the room while people poked heads out from behind various hiding places and the two deputies drew a calm breath for the first time in nearly a minute. The sheriff introduced Samuel to the assembly as Groden's former boss.

Three badge-wearers and one former badge-wearer sat together for over two hours while two of them reminisced and caught up on events over the prior five years since they last enjoyed each other's company. Miller busily translated for Dan's benefit. Groden and Samuel both spoke slowly while monitoring Miller’s progress and waited patiently whenever Miller fell behind due to the two deputies not yet having a gesture to instantly communicate something that was spoken.

Groden recalled that shortly after he became Haystack’s sheriff, he was notified the wanted poster for Thomas Oland was no longer valid. He asked Samuel whether that notification was a result of Samuel’s efforts. Samuel smiled broadly and bowed his head slightly as if nobly accepting the applause of an elated throng.

Groden offered background for the benefit of Miller and Dan. Oland was apprehended by Samuel, who was the sheriff for the town of Quilton at that time, with Groden as deputy. During Oland’s trial at the county seat for that territory, the defendant escaped. A “Wanted — Dead or Alive” poster arrived at Sheriff Samuel’s office in Quilton soon thereafter. Samuel showed the poster to his deputy and Groden immediately understood Samuel was about to turn in his badge and seek Oland, the man who murdered Samuel’s wife. Groden offered to do the same and go with him, but Samuel insisted this was his own

burden and Groden should take over as sheriff of Quilton.

Two days later, the mayor of Quilton pinned the sheriff's badge on the vest of the mayor's son who was a wastrel incapable of hitting a target with a rifle, six-shooter, or slingshot. Groden promptly turned in his badge and sought greener pastures. His meandering brought him to the albeit dusty, "greener pasture" of Haystack at an opportune moment when the burgeoning town of Haystack decided it was in need of a law enforcer. Over the ensuing five years, Groden got married and started raising both a family and a couple of deputies.

Groden invited Samuel to enlighten all three Haystack badge-wearers with what happened next. Samuel's supplement was relatively terse. He caught up with Oland a month later, shot him in one arm, then the other arm a few seconds later, one leg a minute later, the other leg a minute after that, then the stomach, waited another minute until the murderer he had treated like a pin cushion passed out, and delivered the final shot to the heart. When local law enforcement arrived, Samuel displayed the wanted poster, loaded Oland's horse with its owner's dead body, and proceeded to the nearest, major town to collect the reward.

After Dan killed the man who attacked Alice, Miller reminded him that a badge-wearer is not allowed to exact revenge the way Dan did. Miller further educated Dan that Groden managed to avoid any fallout from that incident but instructed Dan that such a mistake must not be repeated. Dan found it intriguing that a bounty hunter need not obey the same rules. He recalled the hunt for the Abottill brothers in Hilltown.

Dan relayed a question via Miller as to whether Samuel dueled with any of the criminals he pursued. Samuel modestly noted he could have done so because he had some duelist skills five years ago. However, it was safer and acceptable to ambush his quarry. He further disclosed he expected his skills diminished appreciably for lack of use.

Perceiving Dan's interest and wanting to avoid painting bounty hunting incompletely, Samuel cautioned that dangers abound for a bounty hunter beyond from the criminal. The criminal often has family or friends or partners who could seek revenge against the bounty hunter. Dan recalled Abottill, Sr., killing Deputy Randolph.

Most importantly, Samuel cautioned, if a bounty hunter killed the wrong person, the hunter would have a bounty placed on his head.

Miller, seeking to discourage Dan's interest in a change of profession, wanted to elicit a story from Samuel that was nearly disastrous for the bounty hunter. He asked what was the toughest pursuit

Samuel attempted.

Samuel answered without hesitation that his pursuit of the Velda gang was the toughest for him. He contemptuously declared those were three of the most vile, sadistic excuses for men. There was a clean distinction in Samuel's mind between suffering inflicted as deserved revenge versus inflicted for undeserved pleasure. The Velda gang was featured on other "Wanted — Dead or Alive" posters and Samuel disregarded the latter option.

When he found where Velda was hiding out, a local there — whom Samuel plied with free drinks — let slip that Velda had not been seen in over a week. The local suggested the ladies at the brothel might know more.

Samuel went to the stable and arranged the care and feeding of his horse, then visited the town brothel and inquired further. A clipped remark that escaped the madam's guarded answers prompted Samuel to chance revealing his purpose. Her eyes opened wide at the plausibility of relief. She gushed about her hatred for Velda and his two henchman over the way they treated her employees. She had no one to turn to for help because the sheriff was in Velda's pocket. She suspected the lone deputy was afraid to go against his boss, let alone take on the gang by himself, but she was confident the deputy hated Velda because of the way Velda and his men belittled him. Dan recalled Henry sneering at him when the Wellbee badge-wearers consulted with the Haystack lawmen before pursuing Kendor.

Anticipating Samuel would go into town and kill Velda's two henchmen, the women excitedly talked over each other describing the two gang members in great detail — more than Samuel, or any man, could find useful. Samuel counseled against that approach. The ladies would suffer grave consequences if the henchmen were removed but Velda was not. It was necessary to kill the two gang members but also necessary to avoid Velda being alerted to Samuel's presence before the bounty hunter could ambush the main villain.

The madam formulated a plan. She said the two gang members had been visiting the brothel nightly since Velda left. One tended to arrive relatively early and sober, the second usually later and drunk. She urged Samuel to hide in one of the upstairs rooms at the ready in case the two came together and/or at unexpected times. She would turn away any customers except the two marked men and notify Samuel when they arrived. He offered her some money for occupying a room but she declined, saying his success would be her remuneration.

A couple of hours later, Samuel heard the front door open and close, followed by a commotion in the parlor. He came out and caught the madam's eye from the balcony outside his room while a man was occupied tormenting the ladies. She nodded the signal. He descended to the parlor as if a satisfied customer. The tormentor looked suspiciously at Samuel and undid the strap on his holster. Samuel

lunged forward and buried his bowie knife in the man's throat before the criminal's fingers reached his six-shooter. Samuel's attack prevented an outcry that might have alerted anyone outside the brothel. With no patrons present inside and the women all onboard, secrecy of the first strike was assured. Together they hid the body in the cellar and cleaned up the blood.

With one dead, Samuel waited patiently inside and near the front door. He bashed in the head of the inebriated gang member as he entered the building. Another body was stashed in the cellar.

Samuel still had no inkling of when Velda might return and the bodies in the cellar would be ripening with any delay. The "smart" move at that point would have been to steal the horses of the dead men from the stable in order to transport their former riders' bodies and head out before dawn to collect a partial reward. That would have been a betrayal of the brave ladies, which was unacceptable. Staying and waiting for Velda required no one find out about the bodies lest someone might alert Velda when he returned. He needed to prevent the outlaw ambushing the ambusher. For the same reason, it required no one notice the absence of two men whose whereabouts were of particular interest for townsfolk who were always on guard against encountering the sadistic henchmen.

The madam came up with the strategy of going about her chores in town the next morning while telling everyone whose path she crossed that the two henchman got tired of waiting for their gang leader and headed off during the night before. She would say she was sworn to secrecy as to where they went and why, except to tell Velda when he returned. While they waited, Samuel would hide in an unused room during the brothel's open hours. Velda would surely come to see the madam immediately upon hearing the madam's story from some resident. Samuel would then free the town of the third of their tyrants.

There were two significant impediments for the strategy to succeed: avoiding the stench of decaying bodies and hiding the dead men's horses they purportedly rode out on. Samuel stole the two horses, hoisted the dead men across their former saddles, and led the horses into the night. Safely away from town, he buried the bodies with the saddles, reins, and bits; thereby forgoing the reward for those two outlaws. He released the horses into the wild and walked back to the brothel before dawn.

The next morning, the madam put her strategy into action. Word spread through town faster than the madam completed her morning rounds. It became apparent no one considered how the sheriff might react. The sheriff and deputy arrived at the brothel while she was still gone.

Samuel was fortunate that a lady noticed movement through the lace curtain of a front window and turned to see the sheriff and his deputy approaching the house. Samuel digressed briefly from his story to tell his audience he thought the sheriff's suspicion was aroused upon learning a stranger's horse was boarded at the stable and that stranger had not been seen since.

The lady spotter silently and urgently directed Samuel to retreat to his room. She instructed one of the other ladies to go with him and “perform” loudly. When the badge-wearers entered through the front door moments later, they were greeted by the observant lady, calm and collected, plus the sound of a woman moaning delightedly from one of the upstairs rooms. Their greeter put her finger to her closed lips and whispered her brother was visiting for a few days and was entertaining one of the ladies in a room upstairs. The lead intruder whispered back a request to speak with the madam. Told she was still in town, they left quietly and walked on to find her for their intended interrogation.

Samuel breathed a sigh of relief when the all-clear was announced outside his room’s closed door. He holstered his gun, came out from behind the chifforobe, and complimented the ladies gratefully. He had been told the sheriff was respectable until the Velda gang came to town. Faced with the choice between being a stooge for the gang or being killed by the gang, it was difficult to fault the sheriff’s decision. He had a family who depended on him staying alive. Samuel killing the sheriff would not have been justified, neither legally nor morally. Then, too, Samuel would have had to trust the deputy or else kill him. The quick thinking lady coupled with the aid of the convincing performer averted the dilemma — temporarily.

The ladies took turns venturing into town to watch and listen for news. Two days later, one scout returned in mid-afternoon at a quickened pace and told Samuel and the others that Velda rode into town a few minutes earlier. Samuel assumed the gang leader’s lack of any shred of decency would be correlated with a lack of intelligence. He apologetically admitted to his Haystack audience that was an almost fatal mistake.

In retrospect, Samuel hypothesized Velda assimilated the madam’s scuttlebutt about the two henchmen plus the sheriff’s report of a brother at the brothel and deduced a sole bounty hunter was waiting for him at the brothel. Perhaps Velda further deduced his two gang members, who were too loyal and dumb to have left without him, were dead. If he did reach that latter conclusion, Samuel later learned Velda kept it to himself, likely anticipating that awareness of such a presumption might free the deputy from fear of retribution if the deputy were to shoot Velda in the back. The madam was likely not the only one who saw through the deputy’s veil hiding his disdain for the gang.

No clients arrived at the brothel for the first four hours after opening that late afternoon. No one was visible outside from any window. It was Samuel’s turn to perform deduction. He concluded Velda returned, did not fall for the madam’s strategy, passed the word for no client to go to the brothel, was hiding across from the brothel with a rifle ready to fire at any man who emerged, and the townsfolk were steering clear of the expected execution. One of the ladies peered out of a rear window and caught sight of movement in the shadow. Samuel further concluded the sheriff and deputy were guarding the rear door, at Velda’s behest.

Time was on Velda's side. Samuel was effectively a prisoner in the brothel and Velda could take as hostage any of the ladies who might leave to buy food in town the next day. Velda would undoubtedly have commandeered townsfolk to bring food for him, the sheriff, and the deputy; and to take shifts watching the house, enabling the three main sentries to nap.

Samuel lost the ability to claim bounties on the two wanted men when he buried them and he abandoned any value from selling the dead men's horses when he let them go wild. He needed to collect on Velda, plus he felt ever more obligated to protect the madam and ladies from Velda's anticipated revenge. He was in a bind.

Groden perforce interjected a worried query as to what happened next, as if momentarily overlooking that Samuel lived to tell. Due to Samuel's slow rendition for Dan's benefit, coupled with his storytelling flair, all three men in his audience were on edge waiting to learn the ending. Had Miller not been engaged in translating for Dan, Miller would have similarly interjected such a query before Groden did.

One of the ladies was the favorite of the deputy when he visited the brothel. She courageously volunteered to go out the back door and approach the shadows where Samuel guessed the sheriff and deputy were hiding. She was certain the deputy would believe her when she told him the other gang members were dead and the two lawmen would then allow Samuel to complete the cleansing of the town. If Samuel was wrong and Velda was guarding the rear door instead of the front, that plan would end disastrously. Samuel had no better ideas.

The madam turned out the lights inside the house and kept watch at a front window. The volunteer took a lit lamp and opened the rear door, illuminating herself in the doorway. Samuel crouched several feet behind her and waited as she walked with the lamp toward where movement was sighted earlier, leaving the door ajar so Samuel could surveil developments.

Samuel credited the subsequent three minutes with inducing a thousand heartbeats pounding in his chest and vaporizing several years of his life expectancy. At last, the lady returned. Samuel whispered for her not to shut the door behind her. She extinguished the lamp and relayed a commitment from the two badge-wearers she spoke with. They would allow Samuel to escape via the rear door but were not willing to help him further. In addition, the first shift of conscripted townsfolk would be arriving soon, so Samuel would have to make his escape immediately; otherwise, the lawmen would be obliged to shoot him if there were witnesses. She said they conspired that if Samuel failed to kill Velda, they could claim the bounty hunter must have been hiding in the woods rather than in the brothel.

Samuel worried it might be a trap. Again, he had no better alternative. He bolted out of the door, running as fast as he dared in the dark and stopped only when he was several rows of trees into the

woods. No shots were fired.

The storyteller curtailed recounting the ensuing details because the impatience of his audience grew palpable. He finished with a succinct flurry. He trekked by moonlight through the woods far enough away from town to navigate undetected behind where he expected Velda was hiding. Velda was asleep with a pair of disgruntled, conscripted townsfolk a few feet away, fixated on the front door of the brothel.

Velda never woke up. The two conscripts thrust their hands toward the sky. Samuel enlightened them as to the status of all three of the gang members and bid them go forth and celebrate. They did; hastily, gratefully, and noisily. The sheriff, deputy, and newly arrived conscripted shift with them welcomed what they heard. All surrogates headed back to town and the lawmen circled the brothel and were welcomed at the front door.

The two lawmen escorted Samuel to claim Velda's horse. Together, they led the horse back and draped the former gang leader's body on it, ready for claiming its prize. The women came out to join them. Samuel shocked the entourage by verbally quitclaiming his prerogative for the body, suggesting the sheriff pursue the reward and present it to the ladies because Samuel owed his own life to them, and to compensate the madam and her ladies who fed Samuel and lost business during the ordeal. Badge-wearers and women expressed heartfelt gratitude for their deliverance and the magnanimity. After all that, Samuel received no compensation other than that gratitude.

Miller presumed Samuel's second story failed to discourage Dan's interest in bounty hunting because Samuel acted heroically. Miller presumed incorrectly. Samuel's story demonstrated a bounty hunter must communicate with strangers to be successful, painfully reminding Dan of his unassailable limitation.

Returning to matters of current interest, Samuel explained he delivered a wanted criminal to the authorities in Wellbee the previous day, collected his reward, and received copies of two wanted posters that looked worth pursuing. He traveled daily over the prior month and wanted to relax a bit first. When he learned that Groden was sheriff of Haystack, he decided the timing was perfect to take advantage of the opportunity to visit. Samuel asked if anyone would object to him staying in Haystack for a couple of days.

The Haystack badge-wearers encouraged that idea enthusiastically; including Dan, who grew to like and trust Samuel surprising quickly, already able to look straight at him. In large part, that was because Samuel treated Dan the same as he treated his other two table-mates. When Samuel showed great interest-in plus admiration-for the deaf deputy upon being informed of Dan's accomplishments and prowess in practice sessions, Dan was completely won over. As Samuel left for his rented room, he

requested being allowed to attend a practice session. The invitation was extended for a previously unscheduled session the next morning.

Samuel watched approvingly from a distance while the sheriff and his deputies practiced marksmanship with their rifles against stationary and moving targets. All three demonstrated laudable accuracy. Dan achieved that accuracy at twice the range of the others. Only Dan practiced gunfight dueling skills because Groden and Miller never tried to develop those skills. Their badges obviated any need for such skills and they would surely never accept a summons to a duel. Nevertheless, they were always hearty enablers of Dan's desire to maintain his skills.

In contrast to Samuel's overt approval of the three men's rifle practice, he watched stolidly while Dan drew both revolvers rapidly, fired both guns from his hips instantly, and struck the target accurately in response to a twitch of the often-repaired, silhouette-of-a-gunslinger that Dan fashioned with his father years earlier. The former sheriff's lack of reaction was not a result of disappointment in Dan's displayed gunfighting abilities but, rather, analogous to a poker player being dealt an unbeatable hand.

Samuel was struck by the inherent conflict that the power he witnessed could dispense either justice or injustice. He stared blankly while searching for the mechanics of how Dan could plausibly team with him, how Groden would react if such an offer were extended, and how dangerous it would be to unleash Dan's ability. At last, Samuel approached the three Haystack badge-wearers with a broad smile and congratulated them on their skills, with emphasis on Dan's, and on achieving an obviously cohesive team. Relying on Miller to translate, Samuel explained that, though he never possessed Dan's gunfighting skills, he learned a few pointers on how to be a better duelist. He offered to teach them to Dan — just in case they might ever come in handy. Dan acquiesced fervently.

Groden left and headed to his office. Miller stayed to serve as interpreter but would have stayed, anyway, driven by his long-sequestered, morbid curiosity about dueling. Samuel taught Dan strategy and tactics, notably the importance of separation distance between duelists and the disadvantage of still moving to reduce that separation when the opponent draws. He taught him how to gauge when the separation distance to his adversary would be Dan's maximum range for accurate first shots from the hip — firing from the hip being faster than extending an arm and bore-sighting for better accuracy.

Normally, a duelist who would prefer to not draw first would call out a demand that the opponent stop and draw once the opponent closed to within that range. The challenge would typically be enough to justify drawing first if the opponent continued to come closer. Clearly, this tactic would not be available to Dan. Instead, he instructed Dan to stop approaching an opponent upon reaching his own maximum, accurate range and abruptly assume the ready position, fully facing toward his opponent with both hands primed to draw their guns. The opponent, experiencing the stress of a duel, would likely misinterpret those actions as Dan beginning his draw and go for his guns in response. Dan would

then have complied with the obligation to let his opponent begin his draw first while still taking full advantage of Dan's expected-to-be greater range. If this tactic did not achieve the desired result and the opponent continued to approach, Samuel instructed Dan to draw. He had Miller emphasize it would be far better to survive a duel while embarrassed over drawing first than to be buried while proud to have granted too many advantages to one's opponent.

Samuel's lessons were presented concisely, which helped instill them rigorously in Dan's memory. Dan incorporated approaching the target and gauging distance into his future practice sessions.

Samuel had a small, waterproof pouch in which he routinely kept wanted posters and information about himself. He wanted it discovered who he was if he were to be killed somewhere. The next morning, he extracted from that pouch the two wanted posters he received in Wellbee and studied them anew. The Wellbee sheriff said there were rumors those two men had been seen within the past month in the adjacent territory to the southeast. Samuel cogitated once more on approaching Dan about a partnership, weighing the pluses and minuses. The latter still far outweighed the former. He bid adieu to his old and new friends and rode toward Roysbrook.

Prior to Nora urging Henry to apply for the job of sheriff in Roysbrook, Henry dismissed that idea partly because he anticipated how boring that job would be in a quiet, little town. It was. A bit more than a year passed since the people of Roysbrook accepted his offer and Henry still waited impatiently for an opportunity to show off his dueling skills in front of the townsfolk. Sure, he did so routinely via practicing in town. That was inadequate for him. All that accomplished was to invigorate burgeoning resentment among townsfolk over his profligate use of their funds to buy ammunition and over needing to walk mindfully around any area where and when he chose to practice. He wanted — no, required — to duel against a legitimate opponent. Nothing less would renew the relished fame that withered too quickly after his slaying of Kendor.

Henry chafed at being sheriff of Roysbrook but discerned no fallback to keep him fed, clothed, sheltered, and on the not-hunted side of the law. Roysbrook residents chafed at him being sheriff but discerned no viable approach to removing him. That duel was a standoff.

When not practicing, Henry strutted around town, intimidating men with steely-eyed stares and making women uncomfortable with glint-eyed glances. Mostly, he kept vigil, longing for a potential opponent to venture into town. His heart leaped at the sight of a holstered gun as Samuel dismounted his horse at the stable.

Henry approached, flashed his badge, and began the standard Henry inquisition. Samuel was cordial while he ducked none of the barrage of questions. When the business of professional bounty hunter was made known, Henry switched abruptly into denigrating mode, hoping to goad his own quarry into defending his honor. He was certain a bounty hunter would be a worthy opponent and, having himself

eluded bounty hunters in the past, possessed no empathy for one then. Samuel never heard of Henry and was taken aback by his behavior. Regardless, there was nothing to be gained in trying to put the lout in his place, one way or another, and nothing to be lost by ignoring the insults and challenges.

The stable master stood a few feet away, observing everything. His young employee was a little farther from the confrontation, motionless and attentive. Samuel gambled the presence of those two men would afford adequate deterrence to a bushwhacking. He calmly, loudly stated his intentions to remount his horse and slowly ride on eastward; then did so. Henry ambled alongside, screaming additional obscenities and emasculating provocations. Horse and rider trod on. The sheriff stopped, like a yapping cur who reached the edge of its territory.

Henry angrily marched back to his office and slammed the door behind him. He tossed about a few things in disgust until he realized he was endangering the hand with which he wields his six-shooter. Slumped in his chair it dawned on him he could have drawn his gun and arrested the bounty hunter on whatever charges and demanded a duel in exchange for not being locked up. He consoled himself by dreaming of a next time.

Ella

Over the course of the two years since widow Randolph with her two children moved in with Ma and Pa Tendle, the arrangement proved highly symbiotic for all five members of the merger. There were some adjustments needed, naturally. One such adjustment was for Ma and Pa to convert to the Randolph family tradition of celebrating the children's birthdays. Because Dan only visited the Tendle farm roughly once per week, he had not yet been exposed to the tradition, let alone converted.

By random chance, Dan arrived for a visit on Ella Randolph's eighteenth birthday. He was befuddled by the exuberance he witnessed so Ella invented some new vocabulary gestures for his benefit. That required several minutes of creativity and Ma's assistance.

Mrs. Randolph believed eighteen to be the age at which a woman becomes marriageable. Ella was too embarrassed in front of Ma to try to teach Dan the ramifications of an eighteenth birthday in the Randolph family culture. None of the five farmers were aware of Dan's experience with Alice and all assumed he had no sexual inclinations. There was no evidence to the contrary because, during the year since Alice left, Dan stowed those inclinations in his self-imposed quagmire of guilt over failing to protect Alice.

Dan's visits to the farm were motivated only partly to share the company of his parents and the Randolphs. As mentioned earlier, he routinely brought things from Haystack that any of the five farmers requested during his prior visit. Perhaps most importantly, he loaded his wagon with any excess agricultural yield the farmers produced each week — in addition to what was needed for the farm and farmers — and brought that to Haystack to sell to shopkeepers there.

The farm's yield gradually increased since the Randolphs moved in and pitched in. As a result, progressively larger amounts of yield often went into that wagon. There were ranches and other farms in the territory that brought agricultural yield to Haystack and the weather cooperated reasonably well with ranchers and farmers in recent years. Despite shopkeepers demonstrating slight bias in favor of their deputy, Dan sometimes brought more than Haystack shopkeepers would buy. Furthermore, without anyone being conversant with the economic theory of how supply and demand determine prices, Dan was bringing back to the Tendle farm roughly the same amount of sales proceeds while selling more than before.

Dan received other news that day after his enlightenment regarding Ella's birthday. Pa took Dan aside and explained that the Randolphs were going to begin taking some of the Tendle farm's yield to sell in Roysbrook. Dan disapproved strongly. His grudge toward the people of Roysbrook and disrespect for them remained as strong as it was when they essentially barred the Tendles from returning. He expressed resentment that anything the Tendle farm produced would benefit those Roysbrook ingrates and added his fear for the safety of the Randolphs treading among them. Pa nodded

his head in agreement on both counts. It was obvious from Pa's demeanor that he had acquiesced to the new approach reluctantly. Dan asked for a fuller explanation as to how it came about.

Almost a year earlier, in the interest of greater prosperity, Ella logically and astutely proposed adding Roysbrook as a market for the Tendle farm. The Tendles took that opportunity to finally tell the full story of how Roysbrook treated them after Dan defended himself against criminals in their town. Ella was informally outvoted four to one at that time.

As Ella's eighteenth birthday drew closer, her mother reevaluated her position on that vote. She wanted Ella to get out "into the world." Ma suspected Mrs. Randolph opposed Ella ending up with Dan and wanted a normal son-in-law, instead. That was true. Although Ella's mother never discouraged her daughter from learning Dan's language, Mrs. Randolph strongly preferred that relationship not develop beyond mundane communication.

If challenged, Mrs. Randolph was prepared to acquit herself on the basis of her legitimate and compelling, secondary rationale. She did not want her daughter to suffer the daily fear of her lawman husband not coming home alive, like Mrs. Randolph suffered — until the former Deputy Randolph's murder laid that ritual to rest. Mrs. Randolph theorized her secondary rationale alone would interdict any question about other, plausible concerns over Ella facing a future encumbered with Dan's difficulties. Even so, she was grateful Ma gave her no cause to test her theory.

Sensing her mother's changing position, Ella revived her proposal and suggested that when anyone would inevitably ask about the source of the produce they brought to Roysbrook, they could claim Ma and Pa sold the farm to the Randolphs and moved to California to be closer to family there. Mrs. Randolph chimed in. She predicted Roysbrook townsfolk would recall that their former compatriot, Abottill, Sr., murdered her husband. Aspiring for absolution, they would treat Deputy Randolph's surviving family cordially. Ma and Pa admitted that was all plausible but were still reticent.

Nineteen year old Frank Randolph was conflicted by his fear of not being able to defend himself out in the world versus experiencing genetically encoded surges of hormones. His was the deciding vote.

Dan patiently remained attentive while Pa recounted the voting. As soon as Pa finished, Dan signed he was going to see Ella about it.

Then it was Ella's turn to be patient and attentive. Dan finished with a demand to be the sixth voter. She was disappointed — not that he opposed her plan, since he reiterated the same two objections his parents voiced previously, which were expected and understandable. She was disappointed he did not communicate a third reason for urging her to change her mind. That third emotion she wanted to see in his gestures was imbedded but hidden, even from himself.

Ella dispassionately validated his concerns. She stressed the need for the farm to be more successful to support ambitions for the future and implored him to trust her judgement. Ella melted his stern countenance with the combination of a gentle touch on his cheek, a slight nod of her head, and a warm smile. Seeing his opposition melt, she turned away slowly and walked off to join the others. He followed, subdued.

The next morning, Dan drove his wagon back to Haystack with half the farm's excess agricultural production for the week and the Randolph family drove the farm's wagon to Roysbrook with the other half. The ever vigilant and intrusively prying Sheriff Henry of Roysbrook came to inspect the newly arrived wagon — more precisely, to inspect the female occupants. He pressed the flesh while he pressed his barely official-sounding inquisition. His prolonged attention attracted the attention of others and word quickly spread that the family of former Deputy Randolph was in town.

People came to pay their respects and bemoan what they read in the newspaper about the horrible transgression committed by the former Roysbrook resident, Abottill, Sr. They congratulated the Randolph family on the purchase of the Tendle farm and a few hoped Dan in Haystack might soon relocate to join his parents. The Randolphs paid no heed to those latter statements.

Henry was unusually serene during the clamor until he interceded and offered to buy a meal for the three visitors. Ella spoke for the first time to indicate they needed to sell the contents of the wagon and head back home immediately. Inhibited by the presence of the throng, Henry restrained his impulse to respond gruffly to the young lady's composed abstention. Instead, he whispered to the widow a crude comment about how some of the wagon's contents could fetch a better price than the rest. Neither of her children noticed and their mother chose not to share knowledge of the remark. Later, she cautioned her daughter to avoid being alone with Henry. That advice was already redundant for Ella.

Henry kept his distance during the remainder of the first Randolph sales trip to Roysbrook. The excursion was graded: smooth and profitable.

Over the subsequent few weeks, several repeat performances fell into a pattern of Henry's attentions having to be tolerated while the family warmly greeted and conversed with other residents at all times to shield themselves from him. Henry's entreaties, civilly presented due to the constant proximity of others, met with politely offered excuses. All five farmers at the Tendle farm soon agreed accessing the Roysbrook market was a wise decision. No Randolph dared mention Henry's antics to any Tendles.

The Randolphs did not anticipate Henry's change of tactics. The next sales trip to Roysbrook was unusually pleasant because Henry was absent. They did not inquire nor did any townsfolk volunteer awareness of the sheriff's whereabouts. The Randolphs were tempted to stay a while longer to foster their rapidly developing friendships but dispensed with that idea upon realizing how that would

undermine their excuses parrying Henry's future offers. Business completed, they bid their usual, warm adieus and began the ride back home.

Ten minutes later, coming around a curve, Henry on horseback appeared on the trail ahead. All three Randolphs froze as their wagon trod on.

Frank, sitting on the right side of the wagon bench, was petrified. Being the man of the family, he felt the burden of protector but he lacked the constitution and means to match the responsibility. He had approached Pa to teach him how to use a gun but Pa was not willing to circumvent Mrs. Randolph's authority over her children and Mrs. Randolph refused to allow it. She understood a gun within Frank's reach would not overcome what was lacking in her son. He stared straight ahead and fought off tears and tremors, neither completely successfully.

Ella, sitting on the left side of the wagon bench, was horrified. As the progenitor of the plan to expand the farm's marketing to Roysbrook, she anticipated feeling the burden of guilt if Henry were to take advantage of them being alone with him. She stared straight ahead and fought off telltale reactions; also, not completely successfully.

Mrs. Randolph, sitting in the middle of the wagon bench and holding the reins, was in turmoil. As the matriarch, she felt the burden of protector at least as much as her son did. As the mother who wanted her daughter to go out into the world, she anticipated feeling the burden of guilt as much as her daughter did. As a woman with moral convictions and duty bound to honor her deceased husband, she was nauseated. She fought off her onslaught of emotions so that she could examine her options rationally; likewise, not completely successfully.

She considered turning the wagon around and heading back to Roysbrook. That would be pointless. She considered inviting Henry to accompany them to the farm and find some excuse to send Ella on ahead via one of the wagon's two horses so that Pa could be alerted and ready for their arrival. That would result in Pa dead or accused of murder. Either result would be intolerable. She considered inviting Henry to accompany them to the farm but she would keep going to Haystack, instead. Henry did not know where the farm was and she could make a run for it when he would eventually realize her plan. How long would it take to get to Haystack? What would happen when the horses needed to rest, eat, and rehydrate? How could she keep Henry from stopping the wagon once she began to make a run for Haystack?

Past behavior of Henry notwithstanding, she wanted to believe her fears were unfounded. She pondered what was wrong with the people of Roysbrook that they could allow this man to be their sheriff. The wagon's horses stopped of their own volition upon reaching the rider obstructing the trail.

Henry cautioned the family that there could be bad men on the trail and offered to escort them home. Mrs. Randolph mustered a faltering air of confidence and politely presented one excuse after another. All failed to deter him. He insisted.

She pleaded to allow them to continue unescorted. He enjoyed her pleas.

In desperation, she finally threw away her lowest priority objective and bargained for the promise that he would then allow them to continue without further molestation or interference from him. He enjoyed that more. Frank remained motionless. Ella could do so no longer.

Ella called out that Dan Tendle was a close friend of theirs and, with defiant eyes, she admonished, “We hear he shoots good.” Henry enjoyed that the most.

Ella was not aware of the contention between Henry and Dan nor that Henry was desperately searching for a dueling opponent of Dan’s quality. The newspaper reporter wanted to write an article about Henry’s obsession with fame and his approach to achieve it. His editor hypocritically decided it was not up to his standards to make such unprovable accusations and nixed the idea. Over a year ago, in a well-worn, belated, newspaper edition Dan brought to the farm, Ella read about Henry’s duel in the gully with Kendor. She remembered that story. Out of necessity, she chose to believe Dan could beat Henry if it came to that. Her intention, though, was to avoid anyone getting hurt, violated, or killed.

Henry never confided to anyone that he was still jealous over the newspaper article lauding Dan's speed and accuracy and desired to prove himself most against him. That dream was always stifled by his inability to conjure a legitimate way to goad a deaf and “not normal” adversary into a duel. Ella’s admonishment inadvertently tendered a pathway to convert his dream into reality.

Henry normally acted impetuously. On this occasion, presented with such an opportunity, he ruminated silently for more than a minute on how best to assure Dan would come to Roysbrook seeking a duel.

He considered letting the family go with a promise from them that Dan would come. They might not inform Dan of their promise out of a desire to protect their friend.

He considered Dan might come in an attempt to exclude the potential for Henry to repeat his ambush of the family when they would undertake a future sales trip to Roysbrook. The family could sell their produce elsewhere and never return to Roysbrook.

He considered forcing the family to go to their farm. That would create the threat that Henry could return to the farm in the future if Dan did not come seeking a duel in Roysbrook — a threat Dan would be obliged to try to eliminate. Mrs. Randolph was adamantly avoiding revealing the location of her farm with her barrage of excuses she initially threw at Henry when he first offered to escort them there. The family might refuse to continue to their farm and turn around to Roysbrook. He would have to harm them to force them to continue to their farm. If he harmed them, Dan would come seeking revenge, unless the family kept that to themselves, again trying to protect Dan. If he harmed them and knowledge of that found its way to Roysbrook, the townsfolk might rise up against him, given how well they received the Randolphs.

This fruitless exercise was an excellent example of why Henry gravitated toward impetuousness. His mind wandered away from the decision he needed to make. He fantasized about the two ladies, imagining them forced at gunpoint to undress in front of him with no recourse than to submit further. Avoidance of the expected reaction of townsfolk back home reasserted itself. Except Mrs. Randolph made her offer as part of her bargain. He could accept that offer, claiming later that he did nothing wrong in fulfilling a widow's yearning, while plausibly succeeding in requiring Dan to seek revenge. The family could keep that violation to themselves, as well, but he found no better choice and he was exasperated from his ruminations.

Ella allowed herself to believe Henry's prolonged silence vindicated her defiant warning. She was all the more horrified to the point of speechlessness and immobility when he ordered her mother to get down from the wagon bench. Mrs. Randolph complied. He dismounted, led his horse to the side of the trail and tied the reins to a bush, then ordered Mrs. Randolph to stand next to him. She did. She accepted that her sacrifice would be required to save her family and all three Tendles.

Frank had a panic attack. He laid down on the wagon bench, shaking violently and struggling to draw breaths. Henry walked over to the wagon and pointed his gun at Frank's head, demanding he end the pretense. Mrs. Randolph pushed Henry out of the way and began administering to her son while Ella held her brother's shoulders in a vain attempt to stop his shaking. Henry waved his gun at all of them and demanded they stop. They ignored him. Henry grew convinced this was not a trick. He deduced it must be some demon spirit. No other explanation was plausible.

He shoved the mother out of the way, put his gun in Frank's mouth, and roared a demand that the demon leave Frank's body or he would end it. The women began screaming for Henry to stop. Frank's symptoms grew more pronounced. Henry pulled the trigger once. Blood and brain matter splattered onto the wagon bench and on Ella. She regurgitated instantly as if the demon found a new body to inhabit. Henry retreated from the wagon, stumbling backwards, untied his horse and mounted quickly. He commanded that Dan had better show up and galloped toward Roysbrook, his head in a tizzy.

Upon arriving in Roysbrook, Henry sought company among saloon patrons as he quenched his thirst

in a bottle of spirits. He fictionalized how he came upon the Randolphs in their wagon along the trail and found Frank possessed by a demon. He described the young man's symptoms and the overwrought distress of the women in great detail to impress upon Henry's audience the lack of any substitute diagnosis. Everyone lamented the necessary purge of Frank's life.

The Randolph women were left in a state of shock. Mrs. Randolph collected herself and helped her daughter clean up. They put an empty sack over the remains of Frank's head and upper torso before moving his body to the back of the wagon. They washed down the wagon bench with some of their water and dried it with another, empty sack. Then they hugged each other and broke down sobbing inconsolably for several minutes. Jittery and with an empty sense inside as adrenaline wore off, they mounted the wagon and continued toward home.

Absent was the guilt both Mrs. Randolph and Ella anticipated experiencing when they first saw Henry ahead of their wagon on the trail. Mrs. Randolph was consumed with sorrow and despair, instead. Ella was consumed with rage. She watched for Dan's return each day around the time he would normally arrive. She dressed herself in clothing that would allow her to immediately ride with him once she intercepted him.

Three days later, she ran toward him. He stopped his wagon and jumped to the ground, worried by the anger in her face. She hurled her momentum into his body and hugged him briefly, backed off a little, and apprised him thoroughly.

Dan retained ill will toward Henry from their first and only shared encounter. It would have required far less than killing Frank for Henry to achieve his goal. Dan seethed and Ella began unhitching the two horses from his wagon. He lurched to help her and they rode toward Roysbrook. After a while, Pa noticed the wagon and correctly surmised the implication of the scene. There was nothing any of those on the farm could do at that point.

The duo arrived at the edge of Roysbrook by late afternoon. They secured their horses and walked together down the middle of the main road. Ella yelled as loudly as she could that Sheriff Henry murdered her brother in cold blood. Townspeople going about their business along the boardwalks stopped in place. More townspeople came outside as Ella continually howled her accusation. Henry emerged from his office near the center of town and took up a position in the middle of the road. Ella stepped away toward the side and cursed Henry piercingly. She shrilled that he would pay and justice would be done.

Townsfolk knew Henry's side of the story and were shocked to hear a diametrically opposed version offered with damning words from the young lady of whom they thought so highly. Henry shouted back that the demon vacated her brother's body and now possessed her. Townsfolk churned in their

quandary. They recognized Dan and recalled both that he was responsible — in their mythology — for the death of William, their shopkeeper's son, but also that he represented a potential escape clause in their regretted decision to hire Henry as their sheriff. If they could have voted at that moment on which of the two gunslingers facing each other they hoped would survive, "none of the above" would have won easily.

Henry needed the townsfolk to bear witness to Dan drawing first so that Henry would achieve the incontrovertible acclaim he desired as being the better duelist. He unbuckled his revolver and put himself in ready position, letting Dan walk toward him.

A vision of Samuel shimmered in front of Dan inducing a quick review in his mind of the lessons Samuel taught him. First and foremost, he supplanted his fury with resolve. He continued walking slowly toward Henry, monitoring the separation distance. With his emotions under control, Dan realized he had to let his adversary begin to draw first because Henry, despite what he did, was not at that moment an indicted criminal nor was he endangering anyone presently other than Dan. The sun was in the southwestern sky, high enough to fully illuminate the center of the road without shadows cast by buildings and not low enough to hamper either combatant's vision. Dan finally assessed he reached the largest separation distance at which he was lethally accurate on his first shots from his hips and abruptly assumed ready position, expecting his adversary to go for his gun, as Samuel predicted.

Henry was surprised but did not draw. That separation distance was farther than he expected, farther than he practiced, and farther than he ever fought before. He presumed Dan had no experience dueling and did not realize the range Dan chose precluded an accurate, first shot from the hip. He strategized that, rather than waste his first shot firing from his hip, he would take the time to fully extend his arm and sight down the barrel for his first shot, sacrificing speed for accuracy.

Then he supposed Dan might have stopped approaching while so far away because he was too scared to follow through. Henry needed Dan to draw before Dan bowed out, but Henry could not conceive how to prod Dan into going for his gun because any movement of his own might be interpreted by bystanders as beginning to draw himself. With any other adversary, Henry might have taunted and ridiculed the man, to which Dan would be oblivious.

Two rooted figures faced each other for more than a minute — an hour in onlooker time. The prolonged delay convinced Henry that Dan was not trying to bow out. He then projected onto Dan Henry's own motivation that Dan equivalently was insisting Henry draw first to prove Dan was the better duelist.

Neither Ella nor the many riveted townsfolk were savvy enough about duels to suspect anything other than shots would be fired soon. Awaiting the prolonged arrival of "soon," doubt crept under Ella's

rage to infiltrate her mind. She contemplated what would happen to her and the others if Henry killed Dan.

She devised and implemented a strategy designed to mitigate that risk. Ella began yelling the detailed story of her family's torture by Henry on the trail, beginning with their initial sighting of him. Dan was not distracted, obviously. Henry surely was. He needed to either shut her up or yell counter testimony to adjudicate his innocence in front of that impromptu, Roysbrook jury. Neither of those needs were plausible under the circumstances lest Dan might draw first, after all.

Giving Dan the opportunity to draw first against a distracted Henry was Ella's objective. She heard the stories about how accurately Dan could shoot. There were no stories about how well he could duel because he never had. She did not know Dan forbade himself from drawing first under the circumstances, rendering her objective unattainable.

Ellas's strategy succeeded, anyhow, albeit via an alternate flight path. The story she yelled effectively taunted and ridiculed Henry, provoking him into drawing first to end his confinement under her story's weight. He drew his revolver and could have fired from the hip before Dan's guns left their holsters. He extended his arm, instead, and bore-sighted his adversary. Two bullets struck him in the chest as he squeezed the trigger. His body reeled and his shot went adequately awry. He began to collapse toward the ground seemingly in slow motion as two more bullets punctured his torso. The final two bullets slammed into Henry's face as it whiplashed forward before the corpse was a heap in a small cloud of dust.

Dan synchronously twirled his six-shooters three-quarters of a revolution while moving them a few inches toward his waist so that they reentered their holsters smoothly. It was a flair Samuel taught him as an amusement. On this occasion, Dan used the stunt for greater purpose. He followed it with icy stares at people up and down both sides of the road to both rebuke and intimidate.

Silence. No bystander entered the road. Dan backed away slowly for twenty yards with Ella joining him. They turned and walked deliberately to their horses. One person muttered a question barely loud enough for a nearest neighbor to hear. He asked when the newspaper reporter was due back in town.

END